

Priestess of Ozandius

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Contents

Prologue	4
Prologue	5
Shannon	5
Prologue	7
Mytris	7
Prologue	9
King Iza	9
Prologue	12
Antoinette	12
Prologue	14
Falien	14
Prologue	15
Verity	15
Priestess of Ozandius	16
Shannon	17
Mytris	21
Antoinette	22
Falien	28
Verity	29
Shannon	33
Mytris	36
Falien	37

CONTENTS	2
Verity	38
Antoinette	42
Shannon	50
Mytris	53
Antoinette	55
Shannon	61
Mytris	64
Antoinette	66
Falien	71
Verity	72
Shannon	73
Mytris	80
Antoinette	82
Falien	85
Verity	86
Shannon	89
Mytris	92
Antoinette	94
Falien	98
Verity	99
Shannon	101
Mytris	110
Antoinette	111
Falien	115
Verity	116
Shannon	120
Mytris	124

Antoinette	125
Falien	128
Verity	130
Shannon	132
Mytris	135
Antoinette	138
Falien	141
Verity	143
Shannon	145
Mytris	149
Antoinette	150
Falien	152
Verity	156
Shannon	158
Antoinette	161
Falien	162
Verity	164
Guinevere	166
Shannon	168
Antoinette	172
Falien	176
Verity	178
Guenivere	180
Shannon	181
Antoinette	184
Falien	186
Verity	187

Guinevere	189
Antoinette	193
Falien	197
Verity	200
Guinevere	202
Antoinette	204
Falien	205
Verity	206
Guinevere	207
Antoinette	208
Falien	210
Verity	211
Guenivere	213
Shannon	215
Antoinette	217
Falien	219
Verity	221
Guinevere	222
Shannon	223
Sequel	224
Prologue	

Prologue

Shannon

The palace of Ozandius is a grand building, of an older time. Every window featured coloured artworks, depicting the trials and tribulations of their forebears. Every pillar was carved, showing ornate figures from myth and mystery. Creatures that didn't exist, such as Fae and Elf, adorned every surface. It was a testament to the skill of the labourers who had been worked to death to create this monstrosity.

The woman waited quietly, silently, to be called before king. Everything in this building was insult to her, and to those that she served. That the royal family took such pride in maintaining such heresies was something of an everlasting shame for those that served the temple. It had only become worse since the death of Prince Azrael. Without him, there was no one to balance his father's hand. No one to call him to account.

Supposedly, the king had heard their complaints, and she'd been summoned as a messenger, to convey the king's intent to the other Sisters of Sarin.

Another woman sat down next to her, and she jumped in surprise. She hadn't seen her approaching. The woman was dressed in white silk, a plain sort of dress. Hanging from her ears were golden cubes, and a similar set lay across her neckline.

The woman leaned back, placing an arm around her, "Isn't it a waste, Shannon?"

She darted a nervous look at the woman side-on, and felt her heart nearly stop as she noticed the pink hair trailing down her back. "Lady -"

"Don't." The woman interrupted, "Wouldn't want everyone to notice, would we? After all, I'm just here to talk to you, today."

She swallowed nervously, "Me? My, lady?"

The woman grinned and pulled her into a sideways hug, "Of course! Everyone else in this drab kingdom is nothing. So boring. At least Azrael had a bit of spunk to him. The rest are either cowards or warmongers, your sisters included. So cowardly they sent the youngest sister to talk to the king."

Shannon felt terrified. Every inch of her was shaking. She didn't know what could have brought her to the lady's attention, but it couldn't be anything good. How had she failed so badly that it meant a visit? Was she to be tortured and then executed? Or worse? Was her place in paradise being pre-emptively denied?

"Stop fretting." The woman pouted, "That's boring. You aren't boring. Your life is just so... Interesting."

Shannon dared a glance at her face, "Interesting, my lady?"

"Of course." She replied, suddenly standing up, spinning to face her, "Come on, girl, look at me. I didn't come to be seen by anyone else. Just you."

The low sister looked up slowly, her eyes wide as she saw the woman. She was shapely, but homely. There was a softness about her that denied the wrathful stories that Shannon had been taught to memorise. Until she saw her face.

Until she saw the black eyes, an endless world of darkness that seemed to draw her in. The darkness could see into her, and Shannon felt as if she were naked. Every scar, every shame laid

bare. As if the goddess was peering directly into her soul.

She looked away, trying not to burst into tears.

“Yeah.” Sarin said slowly, “I think I am right about you. This is going to be fun.”

Shannon swallowed nervously, “May I know your intention, my lady?”

“Sure.” The woman replied, sitting down next to her again, “My intention is to change the world. And you, are going to help me do it.”

She let out a timid squeak, and her face turned red. She hadn’t meant to do that.

“Shannon, little sister of the temple.”

She turned, looking at the woman in fear as she took her hands, “I appoint you to be my High Priestess in all of Ozandius.”

She pulled back one of her hands slowly and hit her ear gently, “Apologies, my lady. Can you say that again?”

“I have appointed you as High Priestess of all of Ozandius.” Sarin stated with a grin.

Prologue

Mytris

He was trying to be as small as possible as he dusted the various ornaments on the wall. He was thorough, getting into all the nooks and crannies and paying no attention to the utterly terrifying display behind him.

He was certainly not noticing the Fae standing in front of his king. He wasn't noticing that her slightly green wings were flaring with open irritation. He wasn't noticing any of this, and so he wasn't at all conflicted about the Fae actually existing.

He wasn't hearing the king make snide remarks about how he'd like to bend the Fae over a table and give her a child, and how he'd rather do that than have a peace treaty with the survivors of the destruction of Calis. Which meant he certainly wasn't feeling nauseous.

"Guards! Clear the room!" The king snapped.

Mytris quickly picked up his cleaning gear and moved towards the nearest door. The guard there examined his equipment, and then shoved him out into the hallway.

He breathed a sigh of relief, and leaned against the wall.

He was too small a figure to get caught up in something like this. There was every chance the king would have decided just to execute everyone who was present. It was one of the risks of serving the palace, but it kept him well-clothed and well-fed, which wasn't something that could be said for most of Ozandius. Not after the taxes for raising the new army had come in and bled everyone dry.

Mytris flinched as he heard a sound of irritation, and glanced sideways down the hall, where the blonde-haired Fae had her hands in the air and was speaking angrily to the people who had come with her.

He turned, he didn't want to know why they were so frustrated.

He began cleaning the nearby mantelpiece, when one of the waiting guests wandered over to him, and she took a duster from his pail and started helping. He smiled weakly, "You need to stay waiting, Sister, or they'll think you're just another servant."

"I need something to calm me down." Shannon replied easily, "You're my rock, Mytris. And I'm not sure speaking to the king is the worst thing to happen to me today."

He smiled nervously at his childhood friend. They'd played on the streets together, living it rough. She had been a great pickpocket, and he'd been great at getting caught. He wasn't sure why she'd adopted him back then, anymore than now. Now he was a low servant at the palace, but she served the temple and the goddess.

"I was told to get the king's message for the palace." Shannon whispered, and Mytris wondered if she should be telling him. Probably not. The Sister continued, "But now, it's worse. So much worse. I'm a nobody at the temple. But I've now been given an ultimatum to give to the king. A freaking ultimatum."

Mytris swallowed. He could tell why she was scared. "He's in a bad mood."

Shannon sighed, glancing down the hall, "Was that really a Fae? I always thought... They didn't exist."

"Please don't disturb the servants, miss." A guard suddenly growled, and Shannon turned. Usually, she'd be meek, apologise and go and sit. It had happened before. Enough that the guards

tended to ignore the two of them unless someone important was turning up.

This time though, she seemed to hesitate, as if she was trying out something new, “I will speak to whom I like, boy.”

The guard’s hand snapped to a sword at his side, glaring, “Sister, I would advise against speaking to any guard in that manner.”

“I am not a Sister.” Shannon snapped.

Mytris glanced at her back in fear. What had she got into her head? The man was being nice. He could have killed her already.

She held up something from around her neck, and the guard turned pale and bowed.

She squeezed his shoulder, “Another time, Mytris.”

What the heck was that?

Prologue

King Iza

The king punched his table, cracking the ancient wood with his rage. He was so angry. Angry that Calis had survived in any shape or form. The cost to his people was ridiculous, and now they came to him, asking for his aid? His people were dead because of them. A Fae was their emissary. A Fae had wiped out Calis in the first place! How could creatures of such intense magic come to him, asking for help? Their very existence was a heresy.

Magic was the root of all evil, and he had sent his own son to wipe it out.

Instead, he'd held a state funeral, and watched the burial of a son who hated him. A son whose entire life was devoted solely to the destruction of magic. A son murdered by magic. He'd never get a chance to repair the rift between them. His son, the paladin of the temple. A holy warrior of Sarin. He was lost. Because of the Fae.

Ozandius was defenceless. That was the root of his own anger, his own anger at himself that was spilling out at everyone around him. His kingdom was facing a war on multiple fronts. Enemies mobilising. Enemies they'd apparently be unable to defeat even if the army hadn't been wiped out. A war against the Fae was folly. Human lives would be meat for the grinder, and nothing more.

The butler nearby stepped out of the shadows, "There are still three more waiting. Shall I send them home?"

Iza sighed heavily, "Who are they?"

"A Sister of Sarin, sent to receive your message. A worker from the Mines of Caledon, apparently to request aid with a goblin infestation. A farmer, complaining that he is unable to meet his quota." The butler said dispassionately, glancing at a handwritten list.

Iza rubbed his face, "Send a Praetorian to the mines. Send the farmer home. I'll speak to the Sister."

"Very good, sir." The man said and left the room.

A moment later the door opened and a timid woman dressed in religious robes entered slowly. She was wearing white, with lacing of light blue. She was a low sister. That was the title, if he recalled it correctly. An errand girl who hadn't even earned the right to pray in public. He wasn't sure if this was an insult, or a way to get his message without any attached interpretation.

He waited for her to arrive in front of him. She gave a short bow, shorter than he expected.

"Do you know the complaints the Sisters have raised?" He asked tiredly, and she shook her head silently. He sighed, "Well, how good is your memory? Can you recite my response?"

"I am trained in all forms of memorisation, sir." She replied, her voice wobbling.

Iza nodded and turned and sat on his throne, "Good enough. Shall we begin?"

"No, sir."

He blinked, "Were you not sent to receive my response?"

"The Sisters sent me for that, yes sir." The timid woman swallowed, clearly on the verge of terrified tears, "Another has sent me for another task."

"What task?" He snapped with irritation. He didn't need this, not right now. He had bigger concerns on his plate.

The timid woman held up a necklace from around her neck, displaying a small golden cube, inscribed with a single symbol. Iza leaned forward, not daring to believe it. "If this is a hoax, she will kill you."

"It is not." The sister said, her voice cracking. "I don't know why I was chosen, sir. But I was. So, you need to listen."

Not just timid. Brave as well. That was something he could respect. "So what message does Sarin send you with?"

"I will recite it." The woman replied, and closed her eyes, lacing her fingers together. "As goddess of Ozandius, I am disappointed in the ruling family. The loss of Azrael has meant a loss of reason. As such, I find it necessary to appoint a guiding hand to the king's advisers."

Iza clenched his fists angrily. He'd never got along well with the goddess, never appreciated her interfering in his work. She was the one who had driven the wedge between himself and his son. Had made his son into her paladin. Allowed magic to grow throughout the kingdom. And now the goddess wished to control his own decisions? That was beyond unacceptable.

All the same, killing a woman who looked like she might piss herself was sort of pointless.

"I will not interfere directly in your affairs, king. She is to be but an adviser. Her daily duties will not be in the palace, but cleaning up the mess in my own temple. She will be there to turn those sacks of cowardly horseshit into my inquisitors. They will root and destroy those seeking to bring harm to Ozandius. Under her guidance." The woman continued, her throat choking.

That was different. Inquisitors. Rooting out magic users and trouble makers. That was something Iza wouldn't oppose, so long as they didn't clash with his own military. Which was mostly wiped out. So this was Sarin's way of preserving order. It made her technically more powerful than him, which was not exactly an ideal situation, but he wasn't in a position to stop her if she tried. He didn't have the military to spare.

"As such, I appoint Shannon of the Sisters of the Temple of Ozandius as my High Priestess." The girl finished, and wiped away tears nervously.

Iza blinked in surprise, "Wait. I don't know this Shannon. Who is she?"

The girl blushed violently, "I am the low sister, Shannon."

The king looked at her in astonishment, "You want me to believe that Sarin has appointed an errand girl as the supreme ruler of her religious order throughout our entire nation? You know nothing of politics, nor of just the basic logistics necessary to run the temple. How could you become the leader of this inquisition? I don't have a reason to believe it. Prove it, or I'm afraid I will have no choice but to hand you over for execution."

A hand touched his shoulder, and Iza glared up sideways and felt his face grow pale as he saw the pink-haired woman standing there. She'd never graced his presence before. Never seen a reason to go to him directly. She'd spoken through her temple.

"You're right Iza, the temple really is a disappointment for me." Sarin said slowly, "But this one isn't. She might not look like much now, but she is my choice as High Priestess. She is uncorrupted. She doesn't know politics, and that I appreciate. She will serve well, and if not, I'll replace her when the time comes. But for now, she is my High Priestess. Is that clear?"

"Crystal." He replied stiffly, trying not to reveal how terrified he was. Sarin was openly appearing, and as the defence of this young girl. She really did have the authority of the goddess in her wake.

The goddess vanished as quickly as she came, and Iza reseated himself uncomfortably, and looked at the girl, crying quietly in terror. She was not nearly ready for the world that the goddess was forcing her into. She'd probably be dead by the end of the week. Yet, until then, if she was getting the temple off his back, he'd accept her.

"High Priestess Shannon, I acknowledge and accept your appointment." He stated, "My war council meets tomorrow. Get the details from my butler, I expect to see you there, unless your other duties interfere."

She bowed to him, and he nodded, "Dismissed."

The woman practically ran from the room, wiping her face on her sleeve. He pitied her, in a way. She wasn't prepared. Even his war council would make mincemeat of her. Yet, it was an opportunity for him to gain the upper hand over the temple. The girl could be manipulated, she could be lead by the nose. The temple had the heart of the people. If they began to sing his praises, instead of ranting about his taxes, he might be able to calm the populace.

That was something he couldn't pass up.

Prologue

Antoinette

The low sister bowed to the priestess as she issued vague threats and berated her for not cleaning thoroughly. How did she know the sister would actually disassemble the lamp stand to find traces of dust? It was so picky. Yet, that was the priestess all over. Live as if she had an iron rod in her hand.

She was a new sister. Her standing was only higher than Shannon's. Which also meant that if the temple had a whipping girl, she'd be it. In fact, she wouldn't put it passed the priestess to appoint her as a whipping girl just so she could punish her some more.

"Ladies!"

The voice boomed out, and Antoinette spun, and then dropped like a stone of the tiled floor, hurting her face. All she had to see was the pink hair. Standing in front of them was a Fate.

She heard the priestess kneel beside her gently, slowly. Unsurprising, she was the highest appointed Sister. She was the one who got to speak directly to the goddess on occasion.

"I am Sarin." The voice boomed out again, causing the ground to shake, "And I am... Disappointed with you."

The priestess bowed her head, "Reverent mother, I am -"

"I don't want excuses or apologies." Sarin snapped angrily, wind hitting Antoinette and the priestess, "What I want is obedience. An understanding of how completely you've failed me isn't necessary. I've spoken to King Iza about this, and he's confirmed my appointment. I am so disappointed with you, and every other temple in the kingdom, that I've felt the need to appoint a High Priestess."

Antoinette swallowed. Someone worse than the priestess? If someone was put over her head she'd become an utter nightmare. She'd be lashing out at everyone, making them know she was still in charge of them.

"My appointee will arrive soon. She's been busy delivering my message to the king. I will allow her to tell you my plans. However much she feels like sharing. She is to be obeyed, and respected, without question or compromise." Sarin spoke, "I won't accept anything less. She is my presence in this world. You will treat her as such."

More bowing. How awesome.

The doors behind her opened, and Antoinette risked a peak. She winced. Shannon had certainly picked a bad time to return. She'd missed out on the crux of the message, and now everyone would be pissed at her for surprising them. She would get her butt handed to her on a silver platter by the time the sisters were done with her.

"This is my High Priestess, Shannon of Ozandius." Sarin spoke.

Antoinette's eyes bugged. She dared to look up towards the goddess, and nearly laughed when she saw she wasn't alone. It was just... Shannon? The lowest sister who had been the lowest sister longer than anyone else? She was useless. It kinda hurt to think that about her friend, but it was true. She'd failed nearly every task handed to her. She could barely remember the doctrines of the temple, let alone enforce them.

"Let me be clear. Her will, is my will." Sarin growled, "If she decides some of your rules are pointless, they are. If she decides that you should no longer be a part of this temple, there will be

no arguments. No trials. You're out. So far as any of you are concerned, she is my avatar. If you do not treat her with the respect she deserves, I may return."

Antoinette ducked her head, planting her forehead against the tiles. There was a threat like no other. Shannon was under the personal protection of the goddess.

There was silence, and Antoinette slowly realised that Sarin was gone, but that all the sisters were still bowing. Waiting for their new high priestess to say something, do something.

The priestess besides her stood slowly, "Welcome home, High Priestess."

"Shut up." Shannon snapped, her voice cracking.

Antoinette tried not to giggle at her friend trying to appear strong. It was like pretending a single sheet of paper was stronger than a fine mesh of chain mail. It was a ridiculous sight.

Shannon walked over, beside her, "I have not asked for your opinion or your speech, priestess. Bow."

Antoinette grinned despite herself as the priestess first scoffed, and then slowly lowered herself. Lowered herself in front of the sister she had kept at the bottom rung of authority for years.

"Sister Antoinette, rise."

She stood up delicately, keeping her face fixed towards the ground. Was she going to be made an example of now? She was technically the lowest sister. That'd be about par for the course of things.

"Sister, I am appointing you as Head of Discipline. Sisters of this temple will no longer hand out punishments as they see fit. They will report the crime to you, along with those involved, and your judgement will determine what course of action to take. You will be just, and you will be consistent." Shannon spoke, the confidence in her voice rising, "Do you accept this responsibility?"

It'd make her everyone's enemy. Make her the most hated sister in the entire temple. But, it would also make her have a chance to remove the abuse from some of the elder sisters. Stop the tyranny of the priestess.

It was way more responsibility than reward.

Antoinette curtsied, "As the goddess wishes."

Shannon smiled briefly at her, and then turned, "Priestess, Elder Sisters, adjourn with me. We have much to discuss."

Her friend walked away without another glance, and Antoinette watched her back as the other sisters began to rise. Shannon was way out of her depth. That was clearly obvious, but what was equally obvious was that she had the goddess at her back. The whole temple would be in an uproar, not just here at the capital, but everywhere. A low sister appointed as High Priestess of the entire kingdom, directly by the word of Sarin herself.

She might not have memorised the whole record of the temple, but she couldn't remember anything remotely like this happening before.

This was going to be amazing fun.

Prologue

Falien

“Ah, my son.” The old man wrapped in furs said, spreading his arms and welcoming him in a hug, “Why must you always disappoint me?”

Falien smiled, pulling back and looking at his father, “Ah, father. Must we always greet each other this way?”

The king turned, and indicated the freezing snow-ridden camp with a hand, “Here are the lives of Yurk. The warriors who lay down their lives because you and I tell them it is a wonderful idea. The least you could do is arrive on time. The first of the warband have already begun marching. The feasting is well and truly over. All that is left is the fight, and I doubt you have come to join that.”

Falien looked at the cold, the damp, and the hungry looks of the men sitting around uncomfortably. Some were sharpening weapons, others just stared out into space. They truly were hideous. He hoped he’d never have to wear such a blank look just to get through the day.

“I came as quickly as travel would permit, father.” Falien replied, “The roads were jammed with peasants.”

“No doubt they were fleeing.” The king replied, “I’m surprised you did not join them.”

Falien resisted the urge to glare at the man. Any open threat was always struck down without the kind veneer the man was attempting to wear now. “I was tempted, I must admit.”

“Tomorrow will be different.” His father sighed, “You will be joining the warband. You will be marching against Ozandius.”

He swallowed nervously, “I was not seeking an excuse to run away, father.”

“This is not a request.” His father replied, “This is an order, and the royal edict has already been issued. You could not run from it anywhere within our borders. You are joining the battle, whether or not it is convenient for you. Sloth has been your way for far too long. It is time you made reparations to your people.”

Prologue

Verity

She snapped upright with a clash of metal as the king entered her tent.

He didn't look at her, simply gestured to the table she had set up. A table she had prepared knowing that the king would come, and he would ask her to look to the future. To sift through the timelines and determine how his war would eventually transpire.

She moved over to it, removing her gauntlets and placing them to the side. She took a flower first, of golden petals. It was a rare object, difficult to obtain. It only grew in a single garden, in a neighbouring kingdom. The land of Solas. There the Faen flower could grow, a relic of a bygone era where peace had existed between men and Fae.

She ate the flower slowly. Practice allowing her to ignore the bitter taste, and to focus on the spread of the magic across her tongue. She placed the stem down slowly, and leaned on the table. Her cheek quivered as she felt the magic activating, spreading out into her. Becoming part of her, and the unique part of her.

The king raised an eyebrow, and she nodded.

He picked up the knife from the table, and pressed it into his finger. A drop of blood emerged, coating the tip. He held out the knife, and she took it, licking the edge of the blade. Her tongue cut open with a sharp pain, combining her blood with his.

She swallowed nervously, pressing her hands into the table and steadying herself.

The light flashed over her. She saw the illusion of time being cast aside. She saw the unravelling streamers of time dancing in the winds. She saw the gods leaning over them, guiding them. Trying to push reality in a direction. They pruned the timelines that drifted too far from their goals, whilst encouraging those that might move towards what they wanted.

The gods were without unity. A chaotic mix, with no clear goal in sight. What some encouraged, others hindered.

The moment that was approaching for Verity, and her king, was a contested one. Many gods stood over it, fighting. Trying to control an outcome that seemed to be beyond the influence of any.

She snapped back to the world and gasped. Blood sprayed from her mouth into the air, and she grabbed her chest painfully. She felt blood leaking from her nose, from her ears and eyes.

She collapsed onto her knees, coughing.

"Well?"

She winced, "My king. Success is impossible without Prince Falien. Peace is not possible without Ozandia. The world circles around a single individual. A woman, who does not wish the burden. Her choices will dictate your success. You will have no influence over her."

The man nodded slowly, "What else did you see?"

"Fire." Verity gasped fearfully, "The skies were on fire."

Priestess of Ozandius

Shannon

She sat down as calmly as she could at the head of the table. She saw the priestess biting her tongue, and sitting down at her right hand. The woman wasn't about to let this go. She was going to fight hand-and-foot to keep her power, to put Shannon in her place. This was her temple.

Maybe that was why Sarin had chosen her. Because the temple belonged to the goddess, not the mortal woman trying to make it her own.

The rest of the elder sisters sat, and Shannon was struck by just how much older everyone else was. She wasn't that young herself. She was in her late twenties, about a third of the way through her life, but the rest were in their late fifties or early sixties. The members of this council were living on borrowed time. . . And these were the women who were supposed to lead the temple?

They would have in imagination. No creativity. If Shannon wasn't here then there would be no one to spur them to think about new ways to do anything.

"High Priestess." The priestess began, "May I ask why you chose Sister Antoinette for this new and vital role? Perhaps a member of this council -"

"What's your name?" Shannon interrupted her.

The woman blinked in surprise, "Pardon?"

"I can't go thinking of you as the priestess." Shannon replied, "I am High Priestess. I am the one who makes decisions not just for this temple, but every temple. So again, what is your name, sister?"

The woman seemingly fought the urge to slap her. That was new. Usually she'd slap her to the ground and proceed to kick her until she got bored or tired. She wondered how long it would be before the priestess acted on that urge. The novelty of having the backing of Sarin would wear off.

"I am Priestess Katherine."

"Sister Katherine," Shannon began, "I appointed Antoinette, because you have shown a disregard to discipline throughout this temple. I chose her, because you are uninterested in discipline."

Katherine's eyes widened in anger and she went to speak, Shannon put a finger to her lips, "Yes, I know you have made great efforts at punishment. I saw them first hand. I bear scars that you, yourself gave me. Punishment is not discipline. I have no need of sisters that cower in my presence, and neither does the goddess. We need sisters who will act, because our mission is going to put us in harms way."

Shannon turned to the others, "I'm not going to tell you our mission. The king knows. But you are not ready, not remotely ready, to execute our mission."

One of the elder sisters spoke, "I am Sister Elba. May I ask, how it is that you have reached that conclusion? This temple has served faithfully."

Shannon looked at her, fighting back the urge to burst into tears and throw herself on the ground, begging for forgiveness. "The goddess does not agree, Sister Elba. You heard her voice yourself. She is disappointed with the temple. We have forgotten why she set us aside. We have followed teachings, without learning them. I wish that wasn't the case. I wish I could reassure you, but the goddess. . . Isn't just disappointed. She's angry."

Elba nodded slowly, "You are our High Priestess. We will lead wherever you ask."

That was a more even-handed understanding than she'd expected. She'd have to watch Elba.

See if she was a suck up, or she actually did just want to serve the goddess. Hellfire she hated this job.

“Our first mission, is to restore order to the temple.” Shannon said slowly, “The sisters are too divided. Each of you has a cluster of sisters that report to you, and then to Sister Katherine. This might make it easier to manage the temple, but it isn’t right. There are rivalries between our sisters. We are supposed to be one united unit. And we have to be so we can do what is coming.”

Katherine openly glared at her, “How do you suggest we go about repairing these fractures?”

“I don’t.” Shannon sighed, glancing at the sunlight, “I have a meeting with the palace in an hour. It will be a short briefing, only an hour or two. When I return, I expect this council will have three suggestions of things we can do. Something we can do immediately, something we can do in the coming days, and something that will make sure this will never happen again.”

She stood up, “I leave you with it. Sister... Emilia, wasn’t it?”

One of the eldest nodded, “Yes, High Priestess?”

“Walk with me.” Shannon said.

As soon as the two exited the room she breathed an audible sound of relief. The sister beside her smiled as they walked slowly, very slowly, towards the entrance, “That was not so bad, High Priestess.”

“Sister Katherine is going to be a problem.” Shannon sighed, “I don’t want her as an enemy. A lot of the elders support her.”

Emilia nodded slowly, “That is so.”

“Including you.” Shannon stated flatly, “You back her to the hilt.”

“You have been appointed as High Priestess.” Emilia began, “That does not mean that the daily tasks of this temple must fall to you.”

“They must.” Shannon retorted, “For a time. Sister Katherine has brought suffering and anger. She preaches vengeance and rebellion. She may as well be trying to create a coup to take the king’s place. She punishes people because she feels like it. Not to enhance the sister. Not to guide them back to the right path. Just out of petty hatred.”

Emilia sighed, “I know it may seem that way for many sisters, but I assure you that -”

“Don’t.” Shannon stopped, turning to glare, “I am not speaking as a lowly sister. I’m telling you what the woman has been thinking.”

Emilia swallowed nervously, “Is this something the goddess has told you?”

“No.” Shannon sighed, and rubbed her forehead, “It’s something she has given me. I can... Hear the loudest thoughts. I can hear some of yours.”

The elder sister looked at her in surprise, and then nodded slowly, “The miracle of affinity. It has been granted twice before in our history. It would be understandable that in this trying time the goddess would grant it to you.”

Shannon shrugged, “It takes some getting used to. But I have it. So when I tell you that Sister Katherine is acting out of hatred in her heart... I’m afraid it’s because that is the truth. I’m hoping that with some guidance, she can become the priestess of this temple again. Become the right leader in the right place. Having her as my adviser could be fantastic for us. I need her insight, her understanding... But I don’t need her sin.”

Emilia smiled broadly at her, “Few people in positions of power as important as yours speak so openly.”

“Maybe they should.” Shannon bit her lip and then sighed, “Anyway, I’ve got some state secrets to learn. I’m hoping you can be a good influence on Sister Katherine. I’d rather not have to find a way to help her myself.”

The elder sister nodded, “I will try and steady her hand.”

“Good.” Shannon turned, “Crap. I need to talk to Antoinette.”

The elder sister blanched at the language, but Shannon was walking away at a faster pace, she stopped near one of the sisters. A low sister she’d been sharing sleeping quarters with, “Have you seen Sister Antoinette?”

The sister dropped to her knees, bowing, “My lady.”

Shannon flinched. “Stop that. Stand up.”

The sister stood hesitantly, face staring at the tiles. After meeting Sarin, Shannon knew this wasn’t what she wanted. She could tell why now. Fear was no way to get stuff done. “I’m in a hurry. Can you have Sister Antoinette join me as soon as possible? I’m walking to the palace.”

The low sister bowed and ran off.

Shannon bit her lip. She really just wanted to fold up into a ball and cry, but she didn’t have nearly the time for that.

She walked out the front of the palace, blinking in the bright light. The smells of the city assaulted her senses. Horse poop, mainly. The smell of unwashed clothes. The smell of people who had it worse than her.

She tried to appear regal as she walked down the steps, moving slowly in the direction of the palace. It was a lie. A brazen, open lie. She wasn’t some perfect person. She wasn’t enlightened and above these people. She was one of them. She still looked at purses as she walked, itching to take them. Knowing one mark from another. Knowing the faces of men you really didn’t want to shake down. Knowing the whores from the honey traps.

There was a rush of breathing, and she glanced next to her at the blonde-haired woman. She grinned, “Sorry, I’m running late for something. But I needed to talk.”

The out-of-breath sister nodded slowly, “Yes, Priestess.”

“Screw that. Screw it so much.” Shannon complained, “You’re my friend, Antoinette. That’s what I need right now. A friend. Imagine if you had the goddess dump all this on you. Would you be coping?”

“Hell no.” Antoinette laughed, “So. High Priestess. That’s some responsibility.”

“It’s crap.” Shannon moaned, “I don’t know if the priestess is actually going to try and stab me in the back.”

Antoinette grinned at her, “Stab you? Nah. She’ll probably try and poison you. Much less obvious. Just blame the chef or whatever low sister was helping in the kitchen. Then probably blame some faction and try and rile up the people again.”

Shannon made a disgusted face, “I hate how reasonable that sounds.”

“So. Discipline.”

Shannon shook her head, “Not really. That’s the open reason, sure. And I do want you to try and stop the favouritism and crazy feuding punishment crap. But, you’re actually going to be the first Inquisitor.”

Antoinette blinked, “Inquisitor?”

“Yeah.” Shannon smiled tightly, “In charge of gathering information about the enemies of the temple and the kingdom. I need you to find out what sisters like the chaos. Want the sermons about bringing down the king to continue.”

Antoinette flinched, “That is so much worse. I should not have said yes.”

“Didn’t really give you a choice.” Shannon grinned, “If I’m getting dragged into this, so are you.”

The girl rolled her brilliant green eyes, “Yay. You know, sometimes I regret being your friend.”

Shannon shrugged, “Yeah, sorry. Oh, I know. Have them arrange quarters for both of us. Can’t have my inquisitor slumming it with girls who want to slash her throat.”

Antoinette smiled, “You know, the size of quarters reflects authority. So the priestess has the biggest.”

Shannon shivered, “Yeah, not going to piss Katherine off like that yet. You and I can share. But the second biggest.”

Her friend grinned and playfully punched her shoulder, “Awesome. So... You going to see Mytris?”

“I wish.” Shannon moaned, “I’m having two hours of the king’s butler talking at me about how to behave around the king. And actual important stuff, but mostly that.”

“Ha!” Antoinette said and turned, “See you when you get back!”

Mytris

He leaned up on his elbows from the sack he was lying on, as he saw the chef bustling into the kitchen. “Need some help, sir?”

The chef waved a hand, “Nah. Relax, boy. The butler is meeting with some bigwig, and she asked for some sandwiches.”

Mytris laughed, “Sandwiches? A lady? That’s weird.”

“Telling me.” The chef snorted as he clattered around, “She said she wanted faltins. Have you ever heard of anyone with any title even eating the stuff?”

He hadn’t. Mytris sat up slowly, mulling a crazy thought over in his head. Faltins were a treat for those who lived on the street. A slightly higher grade of meat than rat, but not by a much. They were a slurry created from wild cat and low-grade fish. Oily, but full of nutrients. A Yurkian invention for soldiers in the field, but available nearly everywhere. “This lady, did you meet her?”

The chef shrugged, “Sure. What are you thinking, boy?”

“I’m hoping I’m wrong.” Mytris said slowly, “But... Maybe... I could take them sandwiches?”

The chef paused, cutting the bread, “Usually that would be a terrible idea. She’s a high-ranking official. I should be the one to serve them. It might be okay if you served her, and I watched. Might. Tell me why.”

“Someone I know.” Mytris began, “She’s never been important. Until I saw her today. One of the guards treated her like she was an actual emissary. She’s short, brunette, but her hair is usually hidden in a cowl. She’s a Sister at the temple. Grey eyes.”

The chef nodded slowly, “It might be her. Maybe. Do you know why the change? I can’t see the priestess being treated like this.”

“No.” Mytris shrugged, “I won’t get you in trouble. Just let me know if you catch her name.”

The chef picked up the tray, and headed back for the door, “Sure thing, kid.”

Antoinette

She looked sideways at the elder sister sitting and watching, and then back at the terrified low sister sitting on the other side of her desk. Beside her one of the upper sisters had her hands clenched around a strong spindle of paper. Gods knew Antoinette knew what it felt like to be hit by that thing.

“Sister Fran, I don’t require your presence.” Antoinette sighed heavily, looking at the elder sister pointedly. The woman smiled sweetly, “The Priestess suggested that I should join you, so I might guide you in what is considered common practice for the order.”

“Let me say it again.” Antoinette glared, “Get out.”

The Sister’s eyes widened in shock, “The Priestess requested my presence.”

“I did not.” Antoinette growled, “And lest you forget, I report directly to the High Priestess herself. It does not concern me what the Priestess thinks might suit this circumstance. I am the one in charge of discipline, not her. So unless you leave, you will join this sister in whatever punishment I see fit.”

The elder sister swallowed nervously and stood up slowly, “I will report this to the Priestess.”

“Please do so.” Antoinette said with as little sarcasm as she could muster, and then waved, “There’s the door.”

The elder left slowly, and she sighed, glaring at the two remaining. “You will speak one at a time. You will not interrupt each other, or both of you will be disciplined. Is that clear?”

The upper sister hesitated, but gave a curt nod.

The low sister tried to nod, but it was difficult through the terrified tears.

Antoinette took out a pen and a sheet of paper, “Names.”

“I am Sister Rath.” The upper sister began, “This is -”

Antoinette held up a hand, “Don’t. Let her speak for herself.”

The low sister swallowed, her hands shaking as she held her dress in balled up fists, “I . . . Am . . . Sister Erin.”

Antoinette nodded, taking her time to write their names, letting them mull. She wasn’t entirely sure what she was going to do here. Kicking out the elder sister was guaranteeing her problems down the line, but she was also the Inquisitor of the High Priestess now, if in secret. That meant she’d need to be able to get information out of the low sisters. There was nothing like the gossip of errand girls to discover just who was corrupt.

“Sister Rath, as succinctly as possible, describe your complaint against Sister Erin.”

The upper sister twitched, obviously resisting the habit of striking the younger woman, “She failed her duties.”

“Which duty?” Antoinette said with annoyance. She wasn’t going to brook any malicious compliance. People could think for themselves, they didn’t need to treat her badly just because she got a job none of them thought she was suitable for.

“Does it matter?” The sister asked in disgust.

Antoinette turned back to the paper, “So noted. Sister Erin, why do you believe you have been brought here?”

"I . . . I didn't clean properly."

Antoinette nodded, "What didn't you clean correctly?"

"She didn't -" Rath began, until Antoinette glared at her, "One more outburst, one, and you will join her in her punishment. I thought I was clear, Sister."

The upper sister swallowed nervously, suddenly realising her serious the woman behind the desk was. That this wasn't just a formality, that she couldn't just subject the younger sister to a punishment. That the Head of Discipline was not an empty title or threat.

Antoinette smiled, "Continue, Sister Erin."

The girl swallowed, absolutely terrified, "I was scrubbing the pans in the kitchen. I forgot one of them."

Antoinette noted it and leaned back, "Sister Rath, any objections to this description?"

"No."

She raised an eyebrow, and the sister curtsied, "No, ma'am."

Better than nothing.

Antoinette waved a hand, "There are few records yet on discipline. Part of my role will be in establishing written records of crimes and just punishments. However, you have experience in handing down punishment. What would you request Sister Erin go through?"

Rath smiled deviously, "Six lashings of a switch."

It was fairly consistent with her own experience. Though six often turned into thirty or forty once the sister got started. Antoinette could remember the pain. Remember that every time you cried out you gained another strike. It was punishment for punishment's sake. It wasn't meant as a learning exercise, but an outlet for the power of the sister in charge.

That was something that Antoinette firmly agreed with Shannon had to end.

Discipline, not punishment.

"Sister Erin, do you believe that punishment would match the scale of your failure?"

The sister blinked, as if she'd never considered the question. The girl thought slowly and then shrugged, "It doesn't seem excessive."

Antoinette sighed heavily, "It does to me, I'm afraid."

Rath bawked, and went to speak, Antoinette interrupted her, "Sister Rath, you have been warned. I believe I am being exceptionally generous in getting you to accept my role as one above you. I will be sharing quarters with the High Priestess. My authority has been granted by the Avatar of the Goddess. Do you question my judgement, and thus question our goddess?"

Rath looked quickly down at the tiles, and said nothing.

Antoinette smiled, "Better. Be sure to let the other sisters know of my generosity, and that it won't continue. Discipline is under my jurisdiction. I can already tell you've hit Sister Erin a number of times. You've acted out your punishment, when it is mine, and mine alone."

Erin looked at her in surprise, and Antoinette nodded, "You may go, Sister Erin. Your punishment is complete. Try and remember to double check what you have done in future. On your wait out, call in Sister Emilia, if you would."

The low sister stood, curtsied and ran from the room.

Antoinette indicated the chair, "Sit, Sister Rath."

As they waited, she began writing up another discipline report, refining how she drew up the borders. This time she put Rath as the recipient.

There was a knock at the door, and Antoinette didn't look up, "Come."

She finished writing and looked up, "Ah, Sister Emilia."

The elder sister nodded her head curtly, "You requested me, Sister Antoinette?"

"Yes." Antoinette sighed, "Seems that Sister Rath here thought that she should deliver punishment before consulting me."

The elder sister nodded, but made no more expression than that.

Antoinette shrugged, "My role is new. My rise is also new. However, I was also appointed by our High Priestess. My authority comes from the goddess. I can't allow such infractions to be common. The sisters must adapt to my position as quickly as we can, if our mission is to succeed."

Emilia noticed that, looking in surprise at her. So Shannon hadn't told them everything then. That wasn't surprising. Once the others knew the mission they'd no doubt start the infighting, trying to prove the others weren't capable of it.

Antoinette indicated the sitting and sullen figure, "What punishment would you recommend, so we can get over this period of adaptation as quickly and smoothly as possible?"

Emilia considered them both. The old woman would know the point of this. That whatever punishment she chose might well be used against her in the coming days. This was Antoinette's way of making every sister sit up and listen to her.

"A public reprimand would seem best." Emilia said after a time.

Antoinette nodded slowly, "And the nature of the reprimand?"

"It would seem best that it be on a case-by-case basis." Emilia replied, "Suiting how frequently the sister is at fault."

Antoinette made a note on her paper, "Agreed. Will you please arrange for Sister Rath to be demoted after morning prayers tomorrow, before the sisters go to their individual tasks?"

Emilia said nothing, just curtsying. A wise choice. It stopped her from revealing her emotions on the subject. Antoinette smiled, "You may both go."

The two shuffled out.

Antoinette smiled as she saw that Rath had left behind her makeshift switch. So she had made an impact then.

She turned around, and back to rearranging the bookshelf. On it were all sorts of books about punishment and how to exorcise the inner desires of a person. Treatises on torture, basically. She dumped the books into a box, and pushed it to the side of the small office.

Then she looked at the two reports in front of her.

She needed a way to keep them organised, so she could easily refer back to them. If these things kept coming in she'd quickly forget if she'd handled a case like this before. Despite Shannon picking her for the job, being organised wasn't something Antoinette was good at. She had been a low sister for a reason. Not least of which was her complete inability to arrive for anything on time.

Having non-specific duties was a boon to that, but knowing how often discipline happened, and at what hours, it probably wouldn't turn out that way.

What she needed was a way to cut off the excuse that she wasn't available at the right time.

And someone who knew how to organise books and reports.

She stepped out of the door of the office, looking at the open floor temple. Nearby, worshippers were bowed, listening to the Priestess rant about the apparent corruption of the capitol, and the coming wrath of Sarin. That was Shannon's problem. She wasn't touching that one with a six foot pole, even if she was meant to be an inquisitor.

On the far wall was the donation area. Food and gold. Most worshippers brought something, even if it was dwindling under the current taxes. It wasn't enough. The temple was having to dip into their funds and buy food from the market, just to keep feeding them the same plain crap they always did.

Yet, it did give her an idea.

Antoinette wandered over slowly, and smiled at one of the two sisters who were measuring the receipt of goods. "Sisters Rin and Eri."

They both curtsied to her, and then turned back to their duties, greeting the stragglers on their way in to the sermon. "Are you two often on collection?"

Rin nodded her red hair, "Yes, sister."

It wasn't like them to be so stand-off-ish. Her new title must be freaking them out. Probably scared she'd come over to punish them for something. Whilst the power trip might be interesting and fun, she really didn't want to turn into someone like Rath.

"Collection involves sorting, exchanging currency, and more, right?" Antoinette asked, "How do you keep track of that?"

Rin indicated a small pile of paper in front of Eri, "We record it."

Antoinette looked over it, at a series of strange marks, "Is this another language?"

Eri fought laughter, and then winced, "No, sister. This is banker's shorthand. I learned it from my father, before he passed."

Antoinette nodded, "It tracks frequency and relative types of value, correct?"

"Yes, sister." Eri said stiffly, obviously regretting her outburst.

"Could it be adapted to help with categorisation?"

Rin glanced sideways at her, "That shouldn't be too difficult, sister."

Antoinette nodded slowly, "Well, Sister Eri, you seem to know this well."

Eri shook her head, "Sister Rin picked it up faster than I. She's made a few changes too, which has helped us do things faster. Like the tally mark system."

Antoinette glanced over, "Sister Rin, would you agree?"

"Modesty prevents my answer." Rin replied smoothly, and then blushed as she realised she'd just bragged to a sister much higher than her. The sister in charge of discipline, no less.

Antoinette sighed, "Fine. Whichever of you is best, stay on collection. The other sister should report to me within the hour, in my office. I've got a project I'd like some help with. You can pull someone from the cleaning service to help the one who stays."

She turned and began walking away, instantly hearing the two sisters arguing that they should stay.

They really were scared of her.

That hurt. They'd been friends the day before. Able to lie in bed and talk crap about the upper sisters.

Authority had so many downsides to it.

She paused outside her office, hearing someone call her name, and turned to see Sister Fran moving towards her, with another of the elder sisters. She sighed and waited for them to catch up. She indicated the door, "I was about to return to work. Can this wait?"

Sister Fran shook her head, "I'm afraid that I must insist that you allow me to advise you."

Antoinette turned a cool gaze to the other elder, "And you Sister? Do you similarly insist upon the Head of Discipline?"

The sister nodded, but hesitated. "It would be best, until we establish where you lie in the authority structure."

"That's established." Antoinette replied offhandedly, "I report directly to the High Priestess. As I am the Head of Discipline, and must have the authority to discipline you, I lie above the elder sisters in all matters of discipline."

Fran didn't miss a beat, "It is not yet established that you have the authority to discipline the elders, child."

Child. That insulting way they always talked down to her. Talked down to every low sister.

Talked down to the people who came to them looking for help.

She was seriously considering making it a sin. She'd run that one passed Shannon.

"I will speak to the High Priestess about making it clear to you, but my role is clear to myself." Antoinette snapped, glaring at the both of them, "I won't tolerate interference in my work, serving the goddess. I have spoke with our High Priestess about my responsibilities, and I know what they are, even if you do not."

Fran frowned, "What do you mean by that, child?"

"That is for the High Priestess to decide to inform you." Antoinette glared, "Now, sisters, leave me to my work. If you do not, then I'm afraid I will have to treat you as children interfering in the work of a busy Sister."

It was something she'd been charged with often enough. The elders never encouraged any of the sisters to stop and talk whilst they worked. If that was something that they wanted to enforce, then it was something she'd enforce against them as well.

"We are only trying to serve the goddess." Fran replied, spreading her hands, "Certainly, even you can see how you might be out of your depth, when it comes to disciplining so many young sisters."

Antoinette sighed, "No. I've already warned you. Unless you wish to join Sister Rath in her public humiliation tomorrow morning, I suggest you move along."

Fran started shaking with anger, glaring at her openly, "You will not! You are nothing but a low sister! You must do as I say! You are not prepared for-"

“Enough!”

The voice boomed from the doorway, and the entire room, service included, turned to face the newcomer.

Antoinette dropped to her knees, bowing. The example rippled through the younger sisters, and eventually reached the elder sisters.

Shannon walked over to them, glaring, “Sister Fran, I assume you have a decent explanation of the outburst I just overheard. Wait, with Sister Antoinette, in whatever space she’s been assigned for her work. I will come to you, soon enough.”

Then she turned and moved towards the service, speaking soothing words, greeting people she knew.

Antoinette grinned. Shannon was fitting into her role beautifully.

Even if she was petrified.

Falien

He swung off the horse awkwardly onto the ground. He'd never done it by himself before. There was always some servant boy ready to become a step, if not a dismounting platform.

He stood up slowly, resisting the urge to grab at his battered loins. Three hours on horseback was also further than he'd ever ridden.

Two soldiers nearby were talking, one of them marked out by a golden sun on his shoulder. The general in charge of the warband, or so he assumed.

He walked over painfully, and then waited. If the general wanted to pretend to ignore him, that was fine by him. He didn't actually want to be here. He wanted to be safe in bed, basking by the warmth of a fire and worshipped by a choice slave girl.

The general turned glaring, "What do you want, boy?"

He sighed, "I am Prince Falien. I was ordered to report."

The general blinked, looking him up and down, "This is the mighty prince?"

"Nothing mighty about me." Falien smiled, "I'm no fighter."

Apparently that was the wrong answer. The general drew his sword and Falien stumbled backwards, feeling the sharp tip piercing the skin of his neck.

The general glared, "You will either fight, or you will die. Someone bring this fool a sword."

Falien stepped backwards, as the general moved uneasily. Reminding him of a wild animal, desperate to fight. Unable to sit still. Ready to pounce.

A soldier tossed a sword without scabbard at his feet. He looked down at it and then back up at the general.

"Pick it up."

Falien laughed nervously, "Uh... No."

The general shrugged, "Your funeral."

The sword spun through the air, faster than he could hope to dodge. It slammed into the side of Falien's head, and he winced.

The blade shattered to pieces.

Falien rubbed the side of his head, "Ow. That hurt. Can we not do that again?"

The general looked at his broken sword and back up, "I didn't see any magic. How did you do that?"

The prince sighed heavily, "I'm... That's a complicated story. Too long and too boring. But, to put it simply, I'm blessed. Now, if we're done with that, can you tell me what I'm doing here? I'm no fighter."

The general stared at him incredulously, "An immortal pacifist? Well, that might just be the most useless thing the king has ever given me. Someone else take care of this idiot."

He wasn't immortal. He was much more complicated than that. But he could understand why the man might well be thinking it.

Verity

She had stood like a soldier whilst she'd watched her general attack Prince Falien. In the normal flow of events, it would be considered a great insult, and a great crime. However, the times were not normal, and the Prince had never been in danger. She had witnessed so many events flowing around that man. He would not be allowed to die, not until his crime was paid in full.

Something she strongly believed would never occur.

To the others, she was just a soldier. The king and the general were the only ones aware that Verity wasn't just human. She wasn't sure if they would even consider her human. She thought of herself as a human. Thought of herself as a knight. She would fight for her nation, for her king. For the man who had raised her, after she had been discovered in the ruins of the witch's tower.

The witch was her mother, in a way. In another, she had been a brutal overseer who stole her childhood and taught her the evils of the world before she was remotely prepared to embrace them.

The king had been a father to her. He was not kind, but neither was he unkind. He didn't abuse her power. He came to her, and asked. Sometimes she couldn't, and would turn him away. He never acted disappointed, or disapproving. He simply accepted her limitations. It was more than anyone had done for her before. She cared a great deal for Falien's father, even if the prince did not.

She felt angry as she watched the prince ignore his father's wishes. Angry that the general would flaunt the prince's invulnerability to attack. It was a political game to the two of them. Each trying to enforce their position in a hierarchy, to set the morale of the troops.

In this great game of gods and men, both were largely irrelevant.

It was true that the prince had a gift, or a curse, but he wasn't blessed by the gods. Few of the gods even knew his name. He was simply a hero riding the current. His importance wasn't in himself or what he could offer. It was something else. Something that wasn't yet clear to her.

The general was even more insignificant. His death was coming, and soon. She could not yet see the why or the how, but she knew it had little to do with their current war.

Foreknowledge was a dangerous gift. Acting on an impression of the future shaped that very same future. In attempting to avoid a possible future you could make it inevitable. Trying to bring about a favourable outcome may make that same outcome impossible. This was her dance. The dance she had been cursed with since her birth. To see all outcomes, dimly.

The magic she practised allowed her to clear her visions of her future, enhance what she could see, but that was all. The gift itself was always with her. She had always known it. She had been born to it. She did sometimes wonder why it was that Faen magic made it so much easier to see the future. Perhaps it was a gift granted to the Fae. Perhaps it was simply that their magic was stronger than that of any witch. Either way, she was dependent on artefacts from their world to help guide the king.

"Soldier." The general waved tiredly, and she walked over, saluting, "Sir."

He nodded, stifling a yawn, "What can you tell me of the enemy?"

He was guarding his words. Protecting her. Most Yurkian soldiers were not quite ready to accept a mage amongst their ranks. They had them, of course. Men and women raised for battle. However, the mages tending to keep to themselves. To see themselves not as soldiers, but as weapons of war. If either the mages or the foot soldiers knew what she was, then she would be accepted by neither.

“They are expecting us, sir.” Verity said stiffly, “However, it appears that Ozandius is still suffering from their loss at Calis. The army is underpaid, underfed and undermanned.”

The general nodded slowly, “Any trouble between here and there?”

Verity shrugged, “The fog of war, general. There is always danger between here and there. The unknown is a danger, sir.”

He smiled stiffly, “Keep me informed. What duties have you been assigned?”

Verity sighed heavily, “I have the night shift caring for our esteemed Prince, sir.”

The general winced, “Bastard. He won’t even fight. Watch him. He has a . . . Peculiar influence on women. I’m hoping it is just a rumour, but even a soldier’s discipline might find it vexing.”

Verity rolled her eyes before remembering herself, “Yessir.”

The general smiled, “Something you want to say, soldier?”

“No, sir.” She barked. She wasn’t entirely how to tell him in this setting. Verity had never been attracted to anyone. Male, female. Human or otherwise. It wasn’t that she couldn’t be attracted. She was open to the idea, but she had walked the continent with the gods since her youngest days. When she’d taken her first footsteps, she had been caught by a god when she fell. When she had first used a potty, a goddess had clapped her hands. When the creatures that forged the cosmos acted as your guardians, it was difficult to find such dull creatures as humanity could provide, attractive.

The general dismissed her, and she moved over to the fire.

She sat stiffly, placing her helmet by her feet. The meat was roasting, and the smell did cause her stomach to remind her how long she’d been marching through this strange weather. Snowing and then blistering hot and back again. The weather wasn’t an attack on them, it was a side effect of something else, something distant that she couldn’t yet see. They weren’t close enough.

She sat, warming herself by the flames, practising her discipline.

Another soldier sat next to her with a plate of rabbit, and elbowed her, “Holy one.”

It was a nickname some of the soldiers had picked up. Supposedly she was stiff enough to be a monk serving in a temple. Ironical, considering that she might well be considered holy by various orders throughout the continent, if she allowed them to become aware of her existence.

She looked disdainfully at the woman shovelling food into her mouth, “Must you be so uncouth, Ruth?”

The woman laughed and spoke through a mouthful, “We’re soldiers. Not bloody monks.”

It was true enough. Most soldiers were little more than rabble. In it for the gold, and the opportunity to make a quick fortune. A few others were in it for the challenge, for the violence. They revelled in the opportunity to kill. There were others who were forced to join, to escape slavery.

There were very few who joined the army to make a difference.

Her stomach growled, but Verity made no move, not yet. This was temptation. She would hold fast against it. “How did you consider our lordling, today?”

Ruth paused, tapping her chin with a greasy finger, “He was kinda hot, if I’m honest. I hadn’t really expected that. I mean, usually if a guy can beat another senseless, that gets me going. First time a freaking coward has got my attention. That being said, he seems like a huge jerk. And so immature. Not really my thing. I mean, I’d probably sleep with him, but only once or twice.”

Verity tried not to smile. That was Ruth for you. Honest, right down to the core. Even when she would be wiser to keep her mouth shut. “If you ended up carrying his child, I expect you might not be so cavalier.”

The soldier rolled her eyes, cleaning her plate. She stretched standing up, “I want some more. You want me to get you something?”

Verity looked up at her, “Certainly. That is kind of you.”

“Whatever, holy one.” Ruth rolled her eyes, turning around.

So it seemed that the prince truly did have an influence. Ruth was a flirt, but she rarely allowed a man to touch her at all. Yet she considered sleeping with the prince in a casual relationship. That wasn’t what the woman wanted in a relationship. She always looked for a man to stand by her, forever.

Verity had glanced at Ruth’s future once, wanting to be able to reassure her friend she would one day find the man she was seeking. One who would fight by her side, and acknowledge her as her own person. Instead, she had seen horrors. Death and destruction. Ruth on her knees, crying and weeping. Surrounded by dead children, bleeding out. Verity had got the distinct impression her friend had slain them. It wasn’t worth judging. Visions of the future were always unclear. The children might simply represent opportunity. Or they could be something a mage possessed. There were many more options than her friend being a childkiller.

Yet, in all these futures, Verity had not once seen Ruth with someone. Never so much as a kiss. It seemed like that was not in her friend’s future, or at least was unimportant to her future.

Ruth sat down, handing her a steel plate. She took it gratefully, and drew her dagger, stabbing a piece of rabbit. She nibbled on it idly, letting her thoughts begin to wander.

Ruth elbowed her, “So, why the interest in the prince?”

“He’s a topic of conversation.” Verity shrugged nonchalantly, “It isn’t common for royalty to join us on the path to battle.”

Ruth frowned, “Yeah, sorta. King always does seem to take an opportunity to talk to you.”

Verity tapped the chevrons on her shoulder, “I am a centurion. Not many soldiers have lived to reach my rank, Ruth.”

The soldier laughed, chewing loudly, “Sure enough. Most do get dead by your point. You’re not much older than me. How did you get the rank? You’ve never said.”

Verity sighed heavily, “I started in the army as a slave, Ruth. No one enjoys remembering the ball and chain.”

The soldier winced, nodding, “Sorry.”

“My last promotion came at the Battle of the Twin Peaks.” Verity shrugged, “I survived. That’s all it takes, in the end. Survive and you’ll reach your promotion.”

Ruth paused, food nearly falling out of her mouth, “Twin Peaks. Wasn’t... That was the battle against the red dragon, right?”

“A wyrm.” Verity replied, “Closer to human than dragon. It was difficult. One person against twenty nine columns. Only two columns came home. Now there was a beast that deserved the songs. Do you think a bard would be able to make the battle something to remember?”

It was a old game between the two. Joking about bards and songs over epic battles. Most

soldiers didn't want to remember the battles, only the victory. They didn't want to remember friends dying. Didn't want to remember the guilt of killing someone for the sin of being there to fight you. On the field, everyone was made equal. It didn't matter what you were fighting for, in the end all you fought for was survival.

Ruth rolled her eyes, "Are you kidding? A freaking dragon. Of course the bards want to know. Too bad everyone is locked up at home, crying."

Verity nodded, "There's some truth to that. One man. It was a man. Old, and bitter. Lashing out. He was already dying. That's why he picked the fight. There are some things, Ruth, that men were simply not meant to triumph over. Too many lives were lost granting that creature it's honourable death."

Ruth picked her teeth, "Aye. Sounds it."

Verity glanced towards the fire, feeling like the darkness of the future was about to explode over her like a wave. "I just hope Ozandius is not among them."

Ruth put an arm around her shoulder, "Oh come on, sister. We're soldiers of Yurk. We'll conquer the whole world before we find something we can't defeat."

Shannon

She stood in front of the shocked and slightly uncomfortable crowd, “Sorry, friends. Just a bit of discipline. Please, ignore us. Sister Katherine, if you would.”

The priestess, obviously halfway through a sermon, bowed her head slightly and turned, “As I have been saying, friends, the will of Sarin is unyielding. In these dark times where so many are forgetting their faith, where the king seemingly raises his hand against our temple, the goddess is watching. She has seen fit to do what she has never done before, and nor do I believe will ever do again. She has seen fit to bless one of us. To rise our lowest, to our highest. This is not a low sister beside me, but rather the gift of Sarin to all.”

Well, that was an incredibly manipulative piece of propaganda. Katherine couldn’t afford to stand against her, so she was pretending that Shannon was the embodiment of the hateful rhetoric she was spreading. The talk that was inching them closer to rebellion. If she kept this up, she’d drive a wedge between Shannon and the king, and that would lead to something appalling.

Shannon smiled, curtsying to the crowd, and she held up her necklace so the closest ones could see it, and the mark that glowed on the golden cube. “I am Shannon. Sister Katherine is correct, until yesterday I really was a low sister. The lowest sister. Yet Sarin has been hurt by what the temple has been doing. What the king has been doing. She wishes to see Ozandius restored to its former glory. So she has appointed me, directly appointed me in the presence of the king, as her High Priestess, over every temple in this kingdom.”

The crowd was silent, gobsmacked. Shannon had known this bit was coming, but it didn’t stop the butterflies rapidly attempting to return her lunch into her mouth. Public speaking was going to be part of being High Priestess. This wasn’t going to be the last time she had to stand up and speak. What the people needed now, more than anything, was confidence in the goddess, and she was their direct symbol of that.

Which meant she was going to piss Katherine off, and take over the sermon.

She started walking down the centre of the crowd, causing the people to shuffle to make room for her. She stopped in the middle, and turned as she spoke, trying to catch the eye of people as she spoke. “Hate has been burning in our hearts for a long time. Hate against magic users, hate against the city of Calis. Yet hate is not at the heart of Sarin. She isn’t someone who strikes down those who dare to disobey her. She doesn’t rely on us to be her military might in the world. She relies on us for something far greater. All of us. She relies on us to be the gift of peace. War belongs to Wrodin, not to Sarin. She abandoned us at Calis, because we were not doing what she desired. She didn’t raise up paladins to kill children. She chose Azrael, to try and take the violence from the heart of the prince, yet in the end, he failed her. He let his hatred against magic turn him into nothing but a weapon of war.”

She stopped, breathing hard and wondering where the hell she was going with this. She heard the voice in her head whisper quietly, “Not bad. Show them a miracle. That’ll be enough.”

Shannon breathed out slowly, trying to calm her beating heart, trying to pretend her hands weren’t a sweaty mess she was desperate to wipe on her dress, “For this reason, I am appointed. To show this world the gifts of Sarin. So, friends, if you accept me, then accept this gift.”

She felt the light wash out from her, and over the crowd. There were panicked shouts, and she stumbled, nearly falling. She felt her arm grabbed by steady hands, and smiled at the man who stood to catch her.

He stared at her in shock, and then let go and knelt down on the ground. She smiled, and patted his head, "Thank you."

He shook his head, "You don't understand. I shouldn't have..."

Shannon grinned as she saw him hold a crutch in the air. A crutch he hadn't used. She nodded and turned, "Friends, examine yourselves. This is the gift Sarin has granted you this day. Give praise to the goddess."

She turned and walked over, pausing next to the Priestess, "That's enough for one day, Sister Katherine. Send them on their way, once their prayers finish."

The priestess smiled tightly and nodded, and then whispered, "The miracle of healing? Was this a once off?"

Shannon blinked, "No. I can hardly be the High Priestess without miracles, can I?"

She turned and walked away, and into the dingy little office.

She saw Antoinette writing away on a piece of paper, and saw the two similar reports next to it. She grinned. Her friend was taking it all in stride. Which was awesome to see. She had half-expected to see her pulling out her hair and screaming at the other sisters.

Antoinette nodded, "High Priestess. I hope you don't mind, but I've already asked these two sisters to state their cases. I would ask that you follow the protocols I am establishing, and interrupt no sister whilst they speak."

Shannon nodded, curtsying, "Of course. You are the Head of Discipline. Even I fall beneath you when it comes to the matters of discipline."

She was just guessing here, but it seemed like the elder sisters were trying to weasel their way out from under Antoinette's authority. This should put an end to that immediately.

Sister Fran swallowed fearfully, and the other sister let out what might have been a quiet grumble. She'd let that go today.

Antoinette nodded, "Thank you, High Priestess. The complaint seems to be that some of the elder sisters believe that I require their guidance to perform my duties. I have disagreed, and repeatedly told them in no uncertain terms I do not. I have been somewhat disrespectful."

Fran glared, going to speak. Shannon placed a hand on her shoulder, and the woman froze. Shannon raised an eyebrow, and Antoinette nodded, "You may speak, High Priestess. Guide us in these matters."

Shannon smiled, and walked to the side of the desk, "I have appointed Sister Antoinette as Head of Discipline. If I had thought she required guidance, I would have appointed a sister to her. If she desires guidance, she is free to appoint a sister to aid her. She is the one chosen by the goddess to guide us from our fallen practices, and back to the justice that is the will of Sarin. I will make this clear at morning prayers."

"That's not enough." The voice whispered in her head, "You have to make an example of these sisters. You can't let them get off from this. Don't be too kind or too gentle."

Shannon sighed and turned, "An appropriate punishment is still required, Sister Antoinette, but that falls to you."

Antoinette nodded slowly, her face twitching at being put in the position of punishing people who had punished her for her whole life. This was one hell of a curve ball, and it could explode in

both their faces if they weren't careful.

"I don't believe an elder sister has ever been punished for resisting the will of Sarin, before." Antoinette said politically, "Perhaps we should seek the guidance of the goddess."

Sister Fran swallowed, "That seems best."

"And as our High Priestess is the embodied will of Sarin, perhaps we should give her a moment." Antoinette plowed on.

Both elder sisters looked crestfallen, and turned to her.

"Fear." The voice whispered, "That's a good sign. They have to learn to respect you. You'll need their help, but not all of them. You can't be as brutal as they would, but this needs to make them sit up and pay attention."

Shannon sighed heavily, "I should be speaking with the elders. We are delaying here. As these elders have not acted as elder sisters, they should be punished as if they were not. Assign them work as low sisters, for a week."

She turned, "Once you're finished here, Antoinette, join me in the elder chambers above."

Shannon left, feeling a slight panic at the time. She did not have nearly enough of it to do everything she was expected to, and she wasn't even dealing with the daily work of the temple yet. She heard Antoinette spelling out the details of the elders punishment.

She hoped she'd made the right choice. The elders might still get special treatment, but at least they would know she was serious.

Mytris

He moved the mop slowly, trying to pick up the vomit, but from what he could tell he was mostly just spreading it all over the floor. It was too wet, and not solid enough and it stank badly enough he might just make the situation worse.

“Gods, what is that smell?”

He turned, smiling, “Oh, Sister Eri. Sorry. A drunkard made his presence known.”

The brunette shook her head, “Geeze. I’m sorry.”

Mytris shrugged, turned back to his work, “Did you need any help with anything?”

“No...” Eri said slowly. She was always like this. Talking to her was like pulling teeth. She always seemed to come over whenever she saw him, and then would proceed to say absolutely nothing, then get frustrated and leave. It confused the heck out of him.

“Say, I heard the temple sent an emissary.” Mytris started, and he heard Eri cough. He glanced over at her, and she smiled weakly, “Yeah, I guess. Sarin appointed a High Priestess. In person.”

He blinked, “Wow. That had to be cool, meeting her.”

“I nearly pissed myself.” Eri said quickly, and then looked down blushing.

Mytris rang out the mop, and gagged at the scent. “Sorry about this. I’m not on break for a long while yet.”

“It’s okay.” Eri said quickly, “I’m not due at the temple for a while. I’m working for a new discipline department that Shannon’s setting up.”

Mytris frowned, “Shannon? I thought she was on the Priestess’ shitlist, not to put too fine a point on it.”

Eri laughed nervously, “Still is. But she’s the High Priestess. She can do what she wants.”

He dropped the mop. His brain just stopped talking his hands. He turned slowly to face her, “We are talking about our Shannon right? Timid, bursts into tears when people talk to her. Once peed herself whilst getting yelled at by the Priestess?”

Eri shrugged, “Apparently Sarin likes her.”

Mytris laughed nervously, “Oh wow. So this is what she wanted to tell me? That’s amazing. And terrifying. So she’s already promoted you? Has to be nice to have friends in high places for once.”

“No, she hasn’t promoted me.” Eri sighed, “She promoted Antoinette, it was her who reached out to me to help out.”

Antoinette. The blond bombshell that had made Mytris realise that girls were far more interesting. The girl always spoke out of turn, always stood up for the people around her. Usually got hit with a brick for her efforts, but she’d just smile and say it was worth it. She was the life of the party, as far as Mytris was concerned. Cute, funny, and just a tad rebellious. It ticked all of his boxes, even the ones he didn’t know he had before he met her.

Eri glared at him. “Forget it.”

The sister stormed away, leaving him standing confused, next to a pile of vomit.

Falien

He relaxed as best as he could, on the makeshift hammock in the tent. They really were a fantastic invention, allowing someone to feel like they were in the bosom of luxury, even whilst they were in a freezing cold tent with front on the ground surrounded by dickish soldiers who had all been told to treat him as some kind of discarded pet.

He was bitter. He usually could move with the flow of things, but being thrust into this petty war was a step too far. The war really was pointless. Ozandius was only vulnerable because they had nothing. Their supply lines were stretched to the limit. Their people were weak and starving. Their government was on the verge of bankruptcy, unable to pay for the loans that allowed them to attack Calis. There was no army left. Just a rag-tag group of old men and young boys, dragged from their beds and forced to carry swords.

Ozandius had no value. It's capture would only mean more mouths to feed. No increased income. It might become a useful trade hub, it was ideally located for it, but merchants prized stability over everything else. It would take ten years of investment to make the country something worth taking. It would be better to buy the king. Or if he wasn't going to be swayed by that, to bribe an official who could become the king with just a little help.

He didn't understand it. His father usually had a decent grasp of these economics. What was he missing that made Ozandius so important? So valuable? What had they acquired that would shift the cost/benefit analysis so radically?

There were a few good things in Ozandius, if he remembered it correctly. He'd only been a child when he'd visited. A diplomatic envoy to Ozandia, their capital city. There he'd been hit by culture shock. The horror of realising some children lived without homes or stability. Yet, he'd seen something amazing. Beautiful women, dressed in clothing designed to hide their appearance. To tease at what might lay beneath. These woman devoted their lives to their city, feeding the hungry, and serving the poor.

They made him feel all sorts of forbidden things, even as a young boy.

It might be possible a few would survive the coming slaughter when this warband marched over their capital. He might be able to turn one or two into a slave. He'd even let them keep their robes, than the usual attire of a slave. When all you saw was flesh, it became less tantalising.

He wondered if the woman who had caught his eye would still have beauty now. She'd been young then. A mere child. Dazzling green eyes, and blonde hair. She'd looked nervous around him, and his family. Yet she'd helped to feed the homeless, bringing them loaves of bread every morning.

Watching her had been the highlight of his journey. He'd asked his father to purchase her, but apparently the Ozandians didn't keep slaves. What a backwards world they created for themselves.

Verity

She deflected the blade of the soldier easily, knocking him backwards with her shield before following up with a quick sword movement that removed his helmet and placed the tip of her sword at his neck.

She smiled as she saw him give up and sheathed her sword. "Tell me, what was your mistake?"

He picked up his helmet, "Assuming I could knock you back, I guess. Sir."

"That was one of them." Verity smiled, "But what was your first mistake?"

He shrugged.

"Engaging an enemy you know is far more skilled." Verity grinned. "The battlefield is tense and active, but all the same. If you see someone coming for you who is ten times your senior, you can't take them by yourself. Make sure the people with you, fight with you. The battlefield isn't a one-on-one dual. It isn't a place to satisfy honour. Dirty tricks are nothing more than ways to keep yourself alive."

He nodded, not quite understanding, but getting there.

She waved to the next soldier to step forward. She could see what they were going to do. She always did. They might act on instinct, but she always had the time to respond. To some, it might be considered cheating. But in battle, there were no rules. All you did, you did to survive. To live for a moment longer. If that meant stabbing someone in the balls, or in the back, it's what you did. What you had to do. If you hesitated, you died. It was that simple.

It was always harder to engage someone in a fair fight than it was to do whatever you had to, just to survive. Pulling your sword up short was harder than following through. That was one of the reasons students always trained against more experienced soldiers. Why a student had a chance to defeat the teacher. The teacher was holding back, because they couldn't do everything they had to be able to do.

Verity held back. The sword shattered in the hands of the soldier and her elbow barely stopped short of crushing his wind pipe. She sighed, picking him up off the ground. "That was reckless. The point of battle is to survive, not to kill. You didn't just risk yourself to get a killing blow at me, you risked the men and women who serve with you. You are a part of their defence, as vital as their own shield."

"Centurion!"

She looked over, and saluted at the general. He waved, and she turned, "Return to drills. Don't cease until I return."

She walked away as she heard the clang of shield and sword, and stopped by the general.

He saluted tiredly, and then shrugged, "Walk with me."

Verity moved in lock-step a full step behind the general, who waved at the camp, "How do you think we're doing?"

"I've been training the new arrivals, sir." Verity said slowly, "Some have promise. Some have none. Others are a liability. I am uncertain if I can reduce the danger that some of them pose."

The general grunted in agreement, and then waved her into his tent. She paused as she saw the maps laid out on the tables.

The man waved a hand, “Our predicament. I was hoping your experience might prove useful. You battled at Twin Peaks, correct?”

“I did.” Verity replied cautiously, “However survival at Twin Peaks was nothing short of divine intervention, sir.”

The general tapped the map, “Between us, and the first border village of Ozandius, are ten known patrol areas of goblins. Beyond that, the first village is Caledon. A small, mining town. Irrelevant for the most part. They have a half dozen houses, a tavern, and a temple. Nothing more. They pose little to no threat. Or they would, normally.”

Verity said nothing, noting that every temple in Ozandius had made it to the battle map.

“Sarin has appointed a High Priestess as her avatar.”

Verity’s check spasmed as she understood. The last avatar of the goddess had been Prince Azrael, a paladin of high renown. Even if he had been lost at the Battle of Calis, his feats there were still extraordinary. He had managed to disable many of the defences of a witch who had managed to challenge a Fae to combat. If this new avatar was anything of the sort, they could become a warrior every bit as dangerous as the wyrm that Verity had fought at Twin Peaks.

The temples were now sources of enemy intelligence, and possible locations where reinforcements could suddenly appear.

“Do we know if Sarin plans to intervene on behalf of Ozandius?” Verity frowned, looking at the network on the map. If the goddess really was opposing this invasion, then it was possible that the nation was not nearly as unprepared as Yurk had thought. It was possible that they could be the ones walking into a trap, about to be cleansed from the face of the continent.

“No.” The general sighed, and then turned and dismissed his guards. He waited until they had left the tent, “I was hoping you could tell me.”

Verity pulled off her gauntlets slowly, “I don’t know if I can tell you anything so . . . Clear. I can try and see, however. See what our immediate future holds.”

The man nodded, “What do you need?”

She pulled a case from inside her breastplate, placing it on the map surface, “Sir, I have what I need. What I need from you is inaction. I do not believe you have witnessed a prophecy before, have you?”

“No.” The general replied tentatively.

Verity sighed as she pulled out a flower from the case, holding it up to the light. Looking at the way it glowed. Looking for imperfections. There were none, this time. She’d made that mistake once, and wouldn’t again. The quality of the product mattered. “I will bleed. Perhaps convulse. If you so much as move in my direction, then the prophecy may be broken. I may be dragged back before we know what we need to know.”

The general nodded slowly, “You have my word. I will make no attempt to save you.”

They always said that. Before they saw what happened to her.

Verity sighed heavily. She didn’t need blood, not for this one. She was just going to peak at her own timelines. To see into her own future, at what might be.

She bit the head off the flower.

It hit her, fast. She gasped, leaning forward, hands gripping the map table. She felt something

grab her hair and yank her backwards onto the ground, spraying blood from her mouth into the air.

The creature stood over her, growling. The tusks glistened with her own blood in the dying light. A hammer raised overhead, coming crashing down. Verity rolled aside before it hit, groaning and holding her chest. She could feel the rent in her armour, the wound below. She'd been run through by a sword.

She stood shakily, glaring as the lumbering beast turned towards her. It was twice as tall as her, and shoulders nearly as broad. It dragged the warhammer like a toy in its fist. She couldn't fight this on strength.

The aura of the creature radiated with darkness. A magic of a sort. It was corrupt. Corrupting. Everywhere the aura touched, died. The ground itself was dying just because of the creature's presence. She couldn't fight this on magic.

Verity cursed, turned and ran. She knew she wouldn't be able to out-distance it for long, but she didn't have another choice.

A strong hand grabbed her by the throat, yanking her aside and tossing her into the snow. She winced, looking up grimly as the woman who had interfered turned slowly, drawing her sword to face the creature. The woman's hair was pink, and hung down below her waist. She wore little armour at all. No more than leather scraps. It kept her agile, but weak. A single blow of the warhammer -

Verity's thoughts were interrupted as the woman caught the warhammer in one hand and plunged her sword upwards into the beast with the other.

The woman turned to face her, and Verity found herself staring into deep and endless black eyes with a terror she had not known in years. An understanding that brought a sense of helplessness with it.

The woman smiled at her, "You know, you're not meant to be here yet. It hasn't happened."

Verity swallowed, "I'm... A prophet."

The woman laughed, "Ah. Well, that explains it. I look forward to meeting you, prophet. But for now, go home. Let them know the orks are coming."

The pink-haired woman stepped over and flicked her skull.

Verity screamed, shaking and holding her head. Blood poured out of her mouth and nose. Her muscles cramped and felt on the edge of breaking. Her skull felt like it had broken where it had been struck. She could feel her body beginning to give up. Sweat and blood beaded and fell from her skin. She was shutting down. Her heart was giving out.

She slammed a hand on the burned grass floor, gripping on to reality.

Verity gasped slowly, taking in lungfuls of air as she stayed in the present. She looked up from where she had fallen at the general. He was standing still. His eyes showed concern, but he was rigid in his discipline.

"Orks." Verity whispered weakly, "Orks are coming."

The general didn't respond, not knowing if he could. Verity smiled weakly, "And a Fate. She'll save us... Now... Save me."

She drifted off into darkness.

Verity felt like she was falling, tumbling. Usually when she passed out, she couldn't remember anything until after she'd woken. This felt different. As if she was travelling to another place.

She hit something solid, something like the ground, even though she couldn't see it.

A gentle hand touched her shoulder, and helped her upright. "Not bad, prophet."

She couldn't see anything, or anyone. Just an endless darkness.

"You can't see it, because you're not ready for it." The voice explained kindly, "You're at a waypoint. This is the gateway to death, but you're not supposed to be here. Not yet."

Verity swallowed, "Then why am I here? Am I dying?"

"In a way." The voice replied, "You're here, because you are on the edge of death, but equally, you are here because I invited you. I wanted to check up on you, Verity."

She smiled slowly, "You're a god. The god of death."

"Yes."

Verity shook her head, "I didn't think there was a god of death."

"There wasn't." He replied, "I'm... Recent. Different. I don't really like the title of a god. It implies I'm above everyone else, but I'm not. We all have our part to play in this cosmos. I am no more important in the coming days than you, or Falien or Shannon. In fact, I'm a good deal less important than you."

Verity swallowed nervously, "Are you selecting me?"

"No." He replied, "You are already part of events. You're already a piece being moved by the gods. Played with, by the gods. I'm not about to steal someone else's tool. What I want, is to make sure you are prepared for what is coming. That you survive. That's all I care about. The world can't afford to lose you, not yet."

Verity shrugged, "So what do I do? How do I prepare for orks and Fates?"

"Don't." He replied, "They're important, for certain, but there is something else you will have to do, to survive. If you want to survive, if you want to live, then you need to leave the army. You need to infiltrate Ozandia."

Verity screwed up her face, "I'm a centurion. I can't just abandon my army. I'd be a deserter. That's a death sentence. I wouldn't be welcome in Ozandia, I'm Yurkian."

"To stay is to die." He snapped angrily, and she winced. She was arguing with a god. He might be placing her between a rock and a hard place, but there wasn't a whole heap she could do about it. She was mortal. Her existence continued only by the whim of the gods. She knew that better than most.

"When Ruth comes to you, when she asks you to help her run, help her. Go with her." The voice replied quietly, "Or you'll die along with everyone else."

Antoinette

She headed up the stairs quickly, hoping the way would be straightforward. She'd never been allowed into this part of the temple before. And she'd never successfully snuck in either.

She paused at the top, looking around in a daze. It was a maze of corridors. She hadn't known there were this many rooms in the whole temple, let alone on just this floor. What did they use them all for?

An upper sister nearby approached, "May I help you, child?"

"I am Sister Antoinette." She snapped, a little more harshly than she intended, "Can you guide me to the elder chambers?"

The sister curtsied quickly, "Apologies, Sister. I did not know your face. This way."

The woman lead her down six or seven corridors, and to a double-door, guarded by two serious looking upper sisters. One of them raised an eyebrow, "Sister Margarite, who is this?"

"I am Sister Antoinette." She spoke before the other could, and both snapped to attention, "The elders are expecting me."

One knocked timidly, and she heard Shannon call for her to enter.

She walked into the brightly-lit room.

The elders were seated around a large table, almost like a dining table. In front of all them were piles of paper, scribbled over with notes.

Shannon was seated at the head, and seemed to be in the midst of an argument with the priestess.

"Ah, Sister Antoinette." Shannon smiled and indicated an empty chair by her left hand, "Sit."

She did as was instructed, noticing that one of the sisters was taking note of every word that was said. So they had a scribe to record the minutes. Maybe there was someone else she could also ask to help her with her records keeping.

Shannon drummed her fingers on the tabletop, "I'm not very impressed. I know having a High Priestess is a surprise to you all. It was a surprise to me. Yet, Sarin herself came to tell you all who I was. There is no doubt. So I'm not sure why you continue to resist."

One of the sisters spread her hands, "It is just your unorthodox approach to this situation. The sisters feel that it is misguided."

Antoinette interrupted, "Apologies, High Priestess. How have they failed you?"

The room went silent, as if the sisters were suddenly reconsidering why the Head of Discipline had been invited to join them. And why two elder sisters were absent after having a public argument with her.

Shannon sighed, "I asked for plans regarding the fracturing of our ranks. The sisters have asked me to reconsider, and allow them each to have their own personal cabal. To reinforce the divisions. Apparently my instructions were not clear enough."

"I don't believe that could be true." Antoinette replied smoothly, "You are quite capable of speaking your mind, High Priestess."

She glared at the elders, "Did you even consider her request before rejecting it? Priestess?"

The Priestess glared at her, "We feel that it would be best -"

“That was not the question.” Antoinette snapped angrily, “What you feel is irrelevant. Your service to the goddess is what is required. Your own heart has its own relationship with the goddess, but your service must reflect your position. If your faith is not strong enough, then you should step aside for a time. If you are incapable of acting as an elder for this temple, then you must step aside for a time. Did you do as the goddess required of you?”

It was clear the others weren’t getting the message. Shannon was the will of the goddess. She wasn’t the scullery maid to be kicked and beaten, not anymore. She was the living, breathing, testament of the goddess. Her requests weren’t to be treated as if a woman had made them. They were to be treated as if they were god-breathed prophecies. It might be an unusual situation, but Sarin would have a good reason for making it so.

Even if that reason was completely obscured from Antoinette. She had to go on faith. And apparently she had more faith than any of these misers.

The Priestess inclined her head, “I’m afraid not.”

Shannon let out a long sound of irritation. Apparently the facade was beginning to crack, revealing the street girl underneath it. The girl who could absolutely get angry, and you’d regret it if you made her that way. Antoinette had certainly regretted it a number of times. Shannon wasn’t one to mess around with. She was patient, and timid and kind and she’d stab you seven times before you could blink. The High Priestess spoke with irritation, “Sister Katherine, upon whose suggestion was I completely ignored?”

The Priestess shrugged, “I do not rightly recall.”

Shannon stood up, leaning on the table, “I have half a mind to dismiss you all from your positions. To make you work your way up from low sisters again. Some of you I need, but not all. I know the sisters who are here at this table who I don’t need. Not for the coming mission. Do I need to name you, before you’ll think of obeying the goddess that you sworn to serve? I am not here by my own choice, sisters. I was appointed. I never asked for this. But I’m here, and Sarin is with me. Do you want to see what happens if you don’t help? Do you want to see the destruction of Ozandius with your own eyes? As I have?”

A chill ran down Antoinette’s spine. So that’s what was at stake.

Nothing less than the kingdom.

The Priestess frowned, “Perhaps if you told us our mission, we would be able to more easily take a leap of faith.”

Shannon sighed heavily, “Fine. This will take you some time to understand. Some of you have heard that an emissary of Calis went to the palace today.”

There was a soft murmur of agreement, “And that the emissary was a Fae.”

This time there was hissing, and the word heresy, repeated.

Shannon shrugged, “It isn’t heresy. The Fae were born from Sumner. Sarin has recently aided them in the situation that ended with the destruction of Calis. Her sisters, Yio and F’rir were both directly involved.”

Antoinette stared at her in shock. The Fae existed. Their creation was at the hands of one of the lost gods. One of the most powerful lost gods. This was groundbreaking. A well-read sister could spend a lifetime writing sermon after sermon about just those few words. It would rewrite a whole swathe of the theology that had been banged into her head since she arrived here. There was no way in hell that the elder sisters would accept it.

Shannon continued, "That is not the end of it. The war that threatened the Fae was ended when a mortal ascended. His name was Trei'el."

The Priestess glared, "There is no need to insult us."

"Trei'el, and his bride, Lady Summer, will be visiting me within the week." Shannon snapped, glaring, "You will pay them the respect they deserve. Sarin has guaranteed their freedom of movement within our temple."

The Priestess swallowed nervously, "Lady Summer? A relation of the lost goddess?"

"Her reincarnation." Shannon replied, and the room went silent. Two gods would be visiting them. That kind of pressure had never come before.

The High Priestess shook her head, "Continuing. Eldrasa is an elfin realm, created by Lady F'rir. It was recently lost, to an infection of corrupted magic called the Fel. That infection is primarily carried by orks."

The Priestess flinched, "Are not orks lead by Drak'tur? The warlock?"

"He is dead." Shannon replied, "Killed in the battle that lost Eldrasa. His rule has been replaced. The orks are fractured. Some have found a way to be free of the Fel. Others willingly serve the new master of the Fel, a Fae called Kru."

Antoinette swallowed nervously. Things were not moving in a direction she liked. There was too much power changing hands, and too rapidly. Even if Ozandius was under the threat of war, it didn't compare to what might happen. No wonder the Faen queen was visiting them. Either to assess if they were an easy target, or more likely, to make sure there wasn't going to be any war between them.

Shannon breathed deeply and sighed, "It seems that Kru may be preparing to invade. Ozandius is not prepared for that."

The Priestess let out a strangled noise, and Shannon eased back into her chair tiredly, looking every bit like she was about to crash out on the table, like she so frequently had during the worst of their theological studies. The lash had never been very good at teaching Shannon to stay awake.

Shannon smiled weakly, "As such, I am tasked with the defence of the entire human realm, with a priority towards protecting Ozandius. There is a plan, but I really don't have the energy to explain it to you, not yet. You need to change your way of thinking, just to start with. I cannot afford to spend the next ten years turning this temple into what it should have been. I need it done yesterday."

Antoinette frowned, "How can we prepare ourselves, High Priestess?"

"To start with, get rid of the factions." Shannon said, stifling a yawn.

Antoinette turned, "You were given several hours to prepare these plans, yes?"

The stunned sisters agreed half-heartily, and Antoinette smiled, "Then you will have these plans in a ready-to-implement stage by morning prayer. Or you will be de-frocked at morning prayer."

She turned to her friend, "Is that acceptable, High Priestess?"

Shannon nodded tiredly and stood, "Make it so."

Then she stumbled out of the room.

Antoinette flinched as the room burst into argument, but she stood and went out into the hallway, catching Shannon as she went to fall into a wall. The others would all be caught up

in the new hierarchy. Trying to work out just how much power they could hold onto, or could seize. Hopefully they were getting the picture that Shannon wasn't going to be easily manipulated. Antoinette tucked Shannon's arm over her shoulder, "Do you know which way the bed is?"

Shannon shrugged tiredly, and Antoinette gestured to one of the guarding sisters, "Lead us to the chambers of the High Priestess, please."

The sister curtsied and lead them a set of stairs that neither had known existed, up to another floor. There were only three rooms here. The sister indicated one of them, and fumbled with a series of keys before opening the door.

Antoinette looked at the key and raised an eyebrow, "Can we get two sets of that, please?"

The sister curtsied, and moved away. Probably to chase one of the low sisters into town to the locksmith.

Antoinette dropped Shannon onto the bed, and turned around, looking at the huge space they had in admiration. It really was huge. The room was at least twice the size as the one that all the low sisters shared. There was even two windows, overlooking the city. The furniture took up so little of the floor space it looked tiny, even though all of it was larger than anything she was used to. It reminded her of home.

Shannon groaned, flopping onto her back and holding her head, "Sorry, Antoinette."

She shrugged, turning back, "Miracles?"

The brunette nodded, pulling off her cowl and dropping it onto the floor. "So... Much... Energy..."

Antoinette locked the door, no need for anyone to see their High Priestess naked, and walked over. She pulled Shannon further up onto the bed, and started unbuttoning her top.

Shannon glared at her, "Hey."

"Can you do it yourself?" Antoinette teased, and the girl rolled her eyes, "... No."

"Then shut up." She grinned, and returned to undoing the top. She pulled it gently off her slender arms, dropping it beside the bed. "I wonder if they'll make you wear something more posh."

"Over my dead body." Shannon mumbled.

Antoinette paused, looking at the fragile and tired girl in front of her. She could see all her ribs, and almost see the girl's spine through her stomach. She was a low sister. They were nearly starved, kept just enough alive to be of use to the other sisters. Especially at times like this, where food was becoming so scarce. It wasn't something either of them could really fix. She just knew they would feel guilt when dinner arrived.

She traced one of the scars across her friend's chest, and Shannon blushed, "Please don't ask."

Antoinette rolled her eyes and unbuttoned her own shirt, and placed one of Shannon's hands on her own scar, across her left side. "The past is past."

Shannon shook her head, tears beginning to run down her cheeks, "No. It isn't. It never will be."

Antoinette sighed, slipping off her own shirt, and then pulled down Shannon's skirt, "It should be. But I get it."

Her friend nodded, biting her lip.

Antoinette wasn't sure what was in Shannon's past. They'd met at the temple. Talking about who you were, before you were a sister, wasn't allowed. It wasn't just discouraged, but rigorously punished. Even their names were new. They weren't the ones they were born by, if you had a name before turning up at the temple. The temple was a new life. You had to forget everything you knew before you entered the service.

She dropped her own skirt, and then wandered over to a door, hoping it was what she thought it was. A quick look, and she grinned.

She moved back, casually dropping her underwear, and Shannon finally asked, "Why are you getting naked?"

"Because I don't want my clothes to get wet, silly."

Shannon muttered, leaning up on her elbows, "What?"

Antoinette thumbed at the door, "You've got a plumbed bathroom."

Shannon blinked in surprise, "Oh wow. Seriously?"

She grinned, jumping on top of Shannon and pushing her flat against the bed, "So, lets get that bra off."

Shannon pushed back, but she was too tired and weak to resist as Antoinette unbuckled and pulled the bra away. She saw why Shannon had resisted and immediately felt guilt. It wasn't just modesty.

There were dozens of angry scars, disfiguring scars, across both breasts.

She stood up quickly, "I'm so sorry."

Shannon shrugged without saying anything, rolling onto her side, and obviously crying. "Nick-ers."

Antoinette pulled them off as respectfully as she could, regretting the whole game. There were more scars. So violent she couldn't look. She'd hoped to tease her friend, to make her red-faced and laughing despite herself. Instead she'd brought up every desperate shame. She couldn't feel more guilty than this.

Shannon held out a hand, "Help me up."

Antoinette gently helped her stand, and moved behind her, arms around her waist. Hoping that it would feel better than being fully revealed. She wasn't sure she could put that behind them, however.

She'd violated Shannon badly.

The girl in front of her sighed, leaning back into her, "Anybody ever tell you, you smell nice?"

Antoinette smiled nervously, not sure how to react, "I make my own soap. Used to, I guess."

Shannon nodded tiredly and took a step towards the bathroom. Antoinette helped her stagger in, and sat her down beside the brass bath, as she scratched her head over how it worked.

There were two cords hanging from the ceiling, and a bucket above them.

She pulled one gently, and heard a gurgling sound. The roof began to leak into the bucket, and then to pour from a hole she hadn't noticed. The bucket filled, and then leaned over, gently pouring steaming water into the bath. In fact, steaming enough the hole room began to fill up with it.

She quickly raised that handle and pulled the other, and frigid water hit the tub, splashing her gently.

"I think I've got this." Antoinette said, adjusting the two cords, and waiting for the brass tub to fill. She felt arms loop around her waist, and Shannon's head lean on her shoulder, "You know why I chose you to help?"

Antoinette laughed, "To torture me."

"Well, there is that." Shannon giggled, "But mostly because I trust you."

Antoinette sighed, grabbing one of her hands, "I trust you too. I guess we're both a little better off now. Can't get in trouble for running our mouths, anyway. Or an afternoon bath."

Shannon nodded, digging into her shoulder, "Yup. But... I do want to tell you. I do."

Antoinette winced, "Forget it, Shannon. I don't need to know. Knowing you were hurt is bad enough. I wish I could fix it, but I know I can't. I know nobody can."

"Thanks." Shannon whispered, and they were quiet for a bit, watching the strange thing in front of them filling with water, "But you deserve more."

Antoinette turned to face her exhausted friend, "Hold that judgement. You should know my past first, don't you think? Before you go all in?"

Shannon shrugged, leaning forward and placing their chests together. Antoinette struggled not to cry as she felt the mess of scars against her. Whoever did this deserved nothing less than hellfire. Whoever had hurt her friend this way. "I was someone, before the temple took me in."

Shannon nodded, but stayed silent. In fact, Antoinette couldn't be sure she hadn't fallen asleep on her feet.

"My old name was Ariadne."

Shannon laughed softly, "I knew it."

Antoinette pulled her back, to look her in the eye, "What?"

Shannon rolled her eyes, "The Yurk rebellion. The third princess goes missing, and just at that moment a brilliant snooty blonde turns up at the temple in Ozandius? Even the sisters were afraid to hit you at first."

Antoinette frowned, "I wish that had lasted. But yeah, you're right. I was Ariadne, the Third Princess of Yurk. I got out of being assassinated by coming here. Also a marriage to a crazy slob in a semi-incestuous relationship."

"Ew." Shannon said, "How incestuous?"

"Marry your cousin or everyone you know gets burned at the stake." Antoinette shrugged, "So... I guess... A four?"

"Meh." Shannon muttered, and then nodded, "I think that's ready."

Antoinette turned, stopping the water, and then sighed, looking at it. "I guess you get first bath."

"You are not washing me, princess." Shannon replied, "Get in."

She was already regretting telling her. She climbed in slowly, letting out just a slight squeal as the warm water wafted over her. She'd never felt like this before. Never had a bath before. Well, she had. She had been a princess of the realm. But that nearly ten years ago. She could barely

remember any of it. She certainly didn't remember it feeling this good. These days she'd be lucky to get a cold shower once a week. This was something else altogether.

"Pass the soap?"

Shannon picked it up, and then stepped into the bath, turning and lying down against Antoinette, to her utter surprise. "Hold me."

The two lay there in the calm water, just breathing.

"I saw Mytris this morning."

Antoinette felt herself blush, and was incredibly thankful Shannon couldn't see her face, "Yeah?"

"He saw me tell a guard off." Shannon yawned, "I didn't get a chance to tell him. I hope I do. There doesn't seem to be enough time in the day. We're both blowing off responsibilities here."

"Not me." Antoinette yawned, "I got Eri helping out."

"Awesome." Shannon said, covering her mouth, "Damn. This makes me feel so heavy. So much more tired."

Antoinette held her gently, nodding, "Yeah. So how did he look?"

"Rattled." Shannon sighed, "Apparently the king was so pissed off he kicked out the Fae emissary from Calis. I guess Mytris got caught up in that."

"Sucks." Antoinette replied, "Too bad he isn't a girl. We could protect him from the daily death threat here."

Shannon didn't say anything, settling into her some more.

It was complicated, the relationship between the three of them.

Mytris clearly had a thing for Shannon, especially since they'd grown up together. Then Antoinette had blown in, and he'd acted stupid around her for a few months. Shannon had got beyond jealous, and Antoinette had taken pranks such as biting ants in her bed, and mud inside her shoes and all sorts. Even gravel in her morning gruel.

So she'd let the girl know she wasn't interested in Mytris in the only way she could come up with on the spot. She'd kissed Shannon.

They hadn't got the chance to talk about that. They'd been spotted by an elder sister who punished them badly. Three months of daily switchings in the mornings. Both of them still bore the scars on their backs.

She'd half expected Shannon to push her away for dragging them into that, but the girl had just pretended like it never happened. So Antoinette had gone along with it. She didn't want to lose her friendship over what she'd thought was a stupid girl crush. She thought the feelings would pass.

They hadn't.

She'd turned to teasing Shannon, but she'd never gone as far as she had today. And Shannon hadn't stopped her at all. Despite all that, she knew that Shannon still liked Mytris more. She didn't even know if the girl liked girls at all. She had no hope of competing with that servant boy. A childhood crush. Nobody had a chance against that.

"Shut up." Shannon muttered.

Antoinette blinked, "I'm not talking, am I?"

Shannon sighed, grabbing one of her hands, “Sorry. Tired. Hard to tell the difference. One of the miracles I got cursed with. Thoughts.”

Antoinette grew bright red, and swallowed nervously, “You just heard every thought I just had?”

“Impressions.” Shannon yawned, clearly almost asleep. “The general gist. Jealousy. Mytris. Kissing me.”

Antoinette let out a strangled noise, hoping that Shannon would fall asleep and forget everything.

“We shouldn’t sleep in the bath.” Shannon sighed, lifting a hand, letting the water run down it regretfully, “Put me to bed?”

Shannon

She flopped onto the bed, burying her face in the incredible softness of an actual bed, and not just a potato sack on the floor. She wasn't sure she'd be able to sleep on this normally, but today would be an exception. The miracles really did take everything out of her.

She felt Antoinette sit next to her, and begin drying her hair with an incredibly soft towel. Shannon shivered at her warm touch. Antoinette began to hum as she dried Shannon's hair, though she didn't seem aware of it. She was so clueless about so many things. Getting jealous of Mytris after she'd gone out of her way to compliment her smell? When she was too exhausted to walk, she went out of her way to say what she liked about the girl.

Maybe she was being too subtle. She'd thought insisting they share the bath would bring up something, instead it had just all been thoughts of someone else. Why would Shannon possibly be thinking of someone else when she was letting Antoinette feel her up? She'd never shown anyone her body. It was too painful. Too shameful. She didn't mean to be ashamed, but she was. Yet she let Antoinette see.

Couldn't she tell that was trust?

Did she have to say the words?

Shannon went bright red, and even in her imagination she faltered and stumbled and couldn't say anything. There was no way she could tell Antoinette what she really wanted to say. Not a chance in hellfire.

"There, all dry."

Shannon rolled over, holding up her hands, "Blanket me."

Antoinette rolled her eyes, pulling back the sheets, and picking her up. Shannon glared as Antoinette went to tuck her in. "No. You too."

The blonde smiled nervously, and slipped in beside her, before letting the blanket fall over both of them. Then she rolled to the other side of the enormous bed. Shannon looked up at the ceiling, "It's heavy, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Antoinette said, her voice slightly muffled.

Shannon moved to her side, looking at the back of her friend. At the scars crisscrossing it. She knew only some of them had come from the sisters. Others were older. Which she'd always been curious about. Most royal families had a whipping boy. If the princess did wrong, someone else took her punishment. She was forced to watch, but no harm came to herself. So why the scars?

She didn't dare to ask. Not when she knew how much the past could hurt.

She shifted over, wrapping her arms around Antoinette, and putting her head against her neck. She still smelled nice. Beneath the weird lavender soap that was left in the bathroom for them, there was the comforting smell of her friend. The woman who was headstrong, and always willing to talk back and protect her. Granted, it had usually done nothing more than both of them getting punished, but it had been nice to have someone with her.

"Netta?"

"Yeah?"

"What's wrong?"

Antoinette stiffened, "I'm confused. That's all. I'll be fine."

Shannon pulled her tighter, "What about?"

"Everything." Antoinette sighed. "You're the High Priestess. I'm wondering how much shit might pour from the heavens if we got caught like this. The guards have door keys."

Shannon smiled, and raised her hand. There was a flash of light, and she nearly blacked out as the miracle took its due. She thought she'd been exhausted before. Yet, she was hoping this would be worth it.

Antoinette spun over in the bed, looking at her with red eyes, "What was that!?"

Shannon wiped her friend's cheek, "A barrier. Nobody can get in or open the doors. No one can see through the windows. Not until I dismiss it. Or fall asleep. So you better keep me awake."

Antoinette smiled weakly, "So... We get in trouble in five minutes?"

Shannon sighed, holding her gently, "You know what, I've changed my mind."

Antoinette looked at her in confusion, "About what?"

"You're an idiot, Netta."

The confusion on the face just escalated, and Shannon rolled her eyes, "Yes, I like Mytris. But I didn't let him strip me, did I?"

She blushed, realising what she'd said and ducked her face, "Please don't make me say that again."

Antoinette raised Shannon's chin slowly, looking at her eyes seriously, as if trying to spot a lie. "Shannon?"

She smiled weakly, not knowing what to say or do. Too embarrassed to do anything.

Antoinette smiled slowly, her face splitting into a huge grin, "Holy hellfire. I'm a dunce, aren't I?"

"Yes." Shannon stuck out her tongue, her face going red as Antoinette snapped forward, pulling her tongue into her mouth with a deep kiss.

She was gentle at first, just holding her. Their tongues moved slowly as their lips pressed together. Shannon breathed through her nose, feeling her beating heart against Antoinette's chest.

She knew this was an indulgence. That she needed to be dealing with all the other crap happening in the temple. That Katherine was probably plotting something, and that if she even suspected what was happening she might be able to use it to get the other sisters to expel her, but she didn't care.

She needed this. They both did.

A moment of peace. A moment where they could feel loved, in a world of chaos they were thrust into.

"Room for one more?"

They broke the kiss, both turning to stare up in terror at the very naked pink-haired woman standing over them. Shannon snatched the blanket up to her chin, whilst Antoinette rolled away, as if trying to pretend they hadn't been caught making out.

Sarin laughed, sitting on the edge of the bed, "Oh, you two are so adorable."

Shannon swallowed nervously, "You're not mad?"

“Mad?” Sarin rolled her eyes, “Why would I be mad? Attraction is a hell of a thing. There’s no boundaries to it.”

Antoinette coughed nervously, “Uhm... What about... You know... To take a woman to your bed is to commit your soul to hell?”

Sarin just laughed, “Yeah. You know, old words tend to lose their meaning. A better translation would be, ‘to sleep with a whore is to commit yourself to hell’, or something like that. I was trying to stop people sleeping around. Two adults who care about each other? Whatever. Hell, I’ve had a couple girlfriends.”

Shannon felt her heart slowing slowly, “Really?”

“Boy, girl, elf or Fae.” Sarin shrugged, “Doesn’t matter much to me. But... It does matter to the sisters, and I thought I should interrupt before Katherine charges in here, or tries to. She’s got your dinner, and about a million complaints.”

Shannon pouted, “Do I have to?”

Sarin stood up, snapping her fingers. “Yes. Sorry.”

The goddess vanished. Antoinette blew up a tuft of her hair as she pulled back the covers, revealing the clothes that had appeared on both of them, “I guess we got told.”

Shannon sat up, and half-waddled over, grabbing her in a fierce kiss. She wasn’t wasting what time they had. Not after finally getting it into Netta’s head.

The two sat like that until they heard a knock on the door.

Mytris

He started awake. The kitchen was silent. There wasn't enough food in the city even for the rats. Not even in the king's palace. Yet, this silence was even worse than that. A silence he didn't understand. A silence that seemed to be threatening something. Demanding something.

The servant boy stood up, and walked over to a window, looking out.

He could see the lamp lighters extinguishing the lights. There wasn't enough fuel to go around, either. The lamps used to burn through every night, and the city used to never sleep. Now the darkness fell, and most of the city slept. Most. There were still the criminal elements. The members of the rising underground movements. People were angry, people were hurting. There was no one in the city who had not known someone who had died at Calis. There was no one in the city who did not suffer because the army was wiped out at Calis.

He stood there in the quiet cold, feeling it wrap around his chest, and he wondered why he was awake. He was spared most of the upset. He had food every morning, even if it was only once a day. That was far more than most of the city had. He had a roof over his head. He didn't have to worry about creditors and debts that could take his world from him in a blink. He didn't have a family he had to protect.

Yet, he was uneasy.

It felt like he was watching the city catch fire, even if he couldn't see anything amiss. Like everyone was about to drown in the blood that would fill the streets. There was war coming. It didn't matter in the end if it was an enemy, or just angry people. The result would be the same. The vermin would drown, the royalty would have their heads placed on pikes. Everyone would die, in the end. If they weren't dead, then the people they cared about were, leaving nothing but ghosts behind. Empty shells of a person who just didn't realise how dead they were yet.

It made him burn with anger.

Maybe that's the reason he woke up. He couldn't stand the destruction of his home. The slow and inevitable descent into chaos. Something had to be done, but he couldn't work it out. Apparently Sarin was working on something. Maybe a god would succeed, a man sure as hell wouldn't. All he could do was add to the chaos. Speed up the descent into madness. Insanity was the realm of the gods. They revelled in it. They alone could turn madness into wonder. Take chaos and craft the perfect solution using it.

Humans were just fodder in the chaos that the gods brought in.

It didn't matter. Even with divine intervention, everyone was still going to die.

Ozandius was over.

It was over the moment that their holy prince, Paladin of Sarin, was slain. Azrael. There was a man. Kind-hearted, but absolutely brutal. He was feared and adored in equal numbers. That had been what kept the core of Ozandius intact. And now not only was the idiot dead, it turned out he died as a heretic. Died trying to destroy all magic, and very nearly destroyed all the gods in the process, or that's what the temple was claiming.

It made some sense. The division between gods and magic had never been exactly clear. They could have the same source. Some stories claimed magic really was the essence of godhood, stolen at the dawn of time. There were plenty of other stories as well, unfortunately. It wasn't clear. It was never clear.

The gods used chaos. They had no reason to bring clarity with them, except to the chosen few who became their instruments in the world. People like Shannon. A beautiful and intelligent young girl, now expected to lead Ozandius out of the darkness.

It wasn't possible.

And she would die because of it.

Antoinette would die beside her. Defending a lost cause, because she would never abandon a friend.

Eri, Rin, and the rest of the sisters would die. Because the people were praying that the temple would save them. When it became clear the temple couldn't save them all, then the people would burn the temple walls. They would reject Sarin, and bring her wrath down on themselves.

Fearful people made for stupid people.

Mytris sighed. He wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight.

Antoinette

She answered the door, and saw the priestess escorted by two upper sisters. She guessed that on the higher levels of the temple they basically served as low sisters. Someone was always stepped on somebody else.

The priestess glared at her openly, and then spoke, "I took the liberty of bringing dinner up to you, Sister Shannon."

The woman waved from where she was lying tiredly flopped on the bed, "Call me by my title, Sister Katherine. Or don't talk at all."

Antoinette smiled, and took the tray from the upper sister, walking over beside the bed, and setting up the dinner tray. "Was that all? The High Priestess is exhausted."

"It was not." Katherine replied as if she were threatening to spit acid, "It would have been appropriate if you had joined us. To reassure the sisters that -"

"Stop there." Antoinette interrupted, "The High Priestess does not need your complaints right now. If you can't reassure the sisters serving under you in your own temple, then perhaps you should be considering stepping aside. The High Priestess has every temple to worry about, not just this one."

Katherine glared at her, "How dare you. I do believe you are letting power go to your head, Sister Antoinette. Must I remind you, that you gave up that life when you joined this temple? You are a sister, nothing more."

"Both of you, shut up!" Shannon yelled, sitting up and causing both the upper sisters to visibly flinch.

She glared at the room, and sighed, "I have fulfilled my duties for today, Priestess. They included healing the sick, dealing with the king, and reminding those under your leadership that they have responsibilities. Whereas you have not fulfilled a single task that was asked of you. A simple task. Have you forgotten that unless you have a solution by morning prayers that you will be de-frocked?"

Katherine blinked in surprise, "I am the Priestess."

"You've done a shit job." Shannon retorted, the street girl completely breaking through, "I've seen better leadership from a dung ball rolling down a hill. These women with you, they serve you without question. Apparently that's tantamount to heresy. You've got no clue what the goddess wants. You just waltz around trying to pretend like Sarin is some goddess of freaking war. You know Wrodin is the god who she neutered for being too aggressive, right? They don't have a good relationship. You're not some bloody saint, Katherine. I don't see any miracles coming from you. The closest to a damn miracle you get is shutting the fuck up."

Antoinette swallowed nervously.

The upper sisters seemed to disappear as if they'd never been there.

Katherine clenched and unclenched her hands, "... You... You dare... To speak to me... Like that!?"

The woman launched her way across the room towards Shannon. Antoinette's fist hit her in the gut and sent her tumbling onto the floor, groaning and holding her stomach. She shook her hand, "Huh. So you really are stupid enough to attack the High Priestess."

The woman staggered upright, "You hit me. You stupid little maggot!"

A hand like a claw slapped the side of Antoinette's face, and she hissed from the pain, blinking furiously from the eye that had been nicked. She turned back, ready to finally deal with the woman when she saw someone else standing in the room. She dropped to her knees, bowing.

It took the Priestess a moment longer.

She knelt slowly, as if she were reluctant to even acknowledge the presence of the pink-haired woman she had sworn to serve with all her heart and soul and life.

Sarin was sitting on the edge of the bed, legs crossed, watching them.

Her expression was not one of amusement.

"So... Who is this crazy chick, again?" Sarin asked slowly, and Shannon sighed, "Priestess of this temple."

"Who the hell thought letting a megalomaniac be in charge was a good idea?" Sarin replied with disgust. "Start her over as a low sister. She's clearly not learned a single one of the lessons I've tried to teach."

Katherine swallowed noisily, "Goddess, please, I beg you to -"

"I was being merciful." Sarin snapped, "You attacked my Avatar, and injured her servant. That you live is testimony to my great generosity and mercy. I am willing to rethink it."

The goddess stood slowly, "Rise, Antoinette. You have no need to bow in my presence."

She stood up slowly, cautiously. The pink haired woman smiled at her, and then touched her face. She gasped as she felt it heal, and vision swam back into her eye. Sarin smiled at her, "Shannon chose well. You were willing to fight for her without a moment's hesitation. That's an admirable trait. In my opinion, it's also kinda sexy. Not sure Shannon shares that one, however."

Antoinette blushed, and then she saw Shannon glaring at her from the bed.

Yep. She was going to need to check her shoes for thistles and underwear for spiders.

Shannon pushed herself upright, and Antoinette dove to catch her as she fell. She helped her stand up, "You've done too much."

"Not enough, apparently." Shannon complained, "Come on. We need to gather the sisters."

The two stumbled into the hallway, and Antoinette signalled to one of the upper sisters who was trying to pretend she hadn't seen or heard anything. "You. Gather the sisters in the hall. All of them. No exceptions."

Shannon glared at the top of the stairs, "Really?"

Antoinette grinned and scooped her into her arms, "Just hold on to me. I've got you."

"You are a total embarrassment." Shannon complained, but looped her arms around her neck.

She moved down the stairs slowly, hearing the shouts beginning to go out across the temple, and the banging of the gong in the main hall. She put Shannon down slowly, going back to being her crutch, and helped her stumble in.

Eri spotted them, and ran across the room with a chair, placing it in front. She really was a helpful one.

Shannon sat on the chair, holding her head whilst waiting for the sisters all to gather, and then for the gossip to begin. She didn't say anything as Katherine walked in as if she owned the place.

She didn't say anything as the elder sisters slowly moved into a circle, and began debating.

Antoinette double-checked she was still awake, and flinched when she saw her face.

Shannon was pissed to high heaven.

She hadn't said anything yet, because she was angry. Beyond angry. The temple was about to find out what happened when you pushed someone too far. Someone who had a lot of authority and the absolute backing of a goddess.

"Shut. Up." Shannon said quietly.

The low sisters responded immediately, dropping to their knees. It took a while for the realisation she had spoken to spiral through the rest of the sisters, but the elder sisters barely spared a glance, assuming it didn't belong to them.

Shannon nodded at her.

Antoinette projected her voice, "Elders. Unless you wish to join Sister Katherine in her shame and punishment, you will be silent!"

The room dropped to true silence. Quiet enough to hear everyone breathing, hear how terrified some were.

Shannon clenched her fists, "Sister Katherine, step forth."

The priestess stepped forwards confidently, "High Priestess. Why have you called this meeting?"

So she was going to lie then. Try and pretend the whole thing hadn't happened, even though it was Sarin who had decided that Katherine should be demoted to the lowest of the low in the temple.

Shannon held up her hand, and there was a flash of light.

Another miracle.

She was going to burn herself out at this rate. Antoinette was starting to get worried about her. Miracles had to have costs. Could it kill her if she pushed herself too hard? Would the goddess let that happen?

Shannon sighed heavily, "You are now bound by the miracle of Truth."

The priestess' face went bright red, and Shannon smiled, "Tell the sisters, all the sisters, why it was that I summoned this meeting."

Truth was an interesting miracle. A cruel one. It didn't force you to tell the truth. It just forced you to answer a question directly. And if you lied, you felt like your soul was lit up like hellfire. It was the tool of an inquisitor. A torturer.

It was also the fourth miracle that Antoinette could count. Saints had at most two miracles granted in their lifetimes. How many had Sarin given to Shannon? All of them? That wouldn't be completely out of the question.

"You called this meeting to punish me." Katherine replied, "Something I must protest against most strongly."

Shannon smiled, "Who decided your punishment?"

Katherine shrugged, "You, of course."

She fell to the ground instantly, screaming and holding her chest. Shannon rolled her eyes, "This sisters, is what happens when you assume the power of the goddess is limited. When you

assume that as High Priestess I can't bind and hold you for as long as I like. The pain will end when you speak the truth, Sister Katherine."

The woman slammed her hands against the ground, crying red tears, "Alright! Alright! Sarin!"

The priestess gasped, falling flat to the ground as the pain ceased.

Shannon smiled, "Sarin decided your punishment? Through me, or in person?"

"In person." Katherine wept.

A murmur moved through the crowd. Antoinette held up a hand, shutting them up. She needed for them all to hear Katherine's confession. She didn't want to have to go squashing any rumours. It had to be Katherine herself who made the condemnation, or no one would believe it. No one would follow it. They'd try and turf Shannon out the door.

Shannon nodded, "Why did Sarin decide you needed to be punished?"

Katherine sat up slowly, still holding her chest and crying slowly, though the tears were now less bloody, "I attacked you, her avatar."

Antoinette let that one ripple through the crowd. Let them realise just what a horrible old hag the woman actually was that she attacked a divinely appointed messenger of the gods. Attacked the woman who was the chosen one of who she had sworn to serve all the days of her life. She was a hypocrite.

Shannon stood weakly, "And what punishment did Sarin tell me to enact?"

Katherine bit her lip, "I don't want to say. Please. Don't make me say it."

Shannon glared at her, as Katherine was wracked with pain, standing unsteadily, "The miracle of truth does not care whether you wish to speak or not. It demands it. I will not release you from it. You will explain the situation to the others here."

Katherine screamed openly, over and over. Trying to resist. Trying not to cry out.

Antoinette could already see people looking away. It was somewhere between horrifying and fantastic to watch, even for her. Yet she knew she had to show solidarity with Shannon. She had to be her cruel right hand. She was the Head of Discipline, and that's all this would be. She was the iron rod in the hand of the High Priestess. That is what everyone had to think. Had to believe.

Katherine gave in, "Okay! Sarin demanded I be made a low sister. The lowest sister."

The pain faded, and the woman curled into a ball, crying in absolute terror.

Antoinette felt a huge wave of relief pass over her, and almost felt like crying herself. She nearly believed that Katherine would let herself be killed, rather than explain she was no longer the High Priestess.

The elders began to complain and grumble amongst themselves.

"Sarin handed down this punishment." Shannon snapped, silencing them, "And so we will do as she wills. Sister Katherine is stripped of her rank, her privileges. Her quarters are reassigned to the shared dorm. She is to be treated with no great respect. She is to be treated with no great disrespect. She is but one of us. We are all called to serve the goddess. In this, Katherine has failed."

Antoinette took a small step closer as she saw Shannon's knees beginning to shake, "Sarin's mercy was granting life to Sister Katherine. We are on the verge of war. Not just with the surrounding nations. Worse things are coming. This temple was supposed to be the first line of

defence. If this is all we can offer, a priestess who thought herself more important than her goddess, then we have already failed. I will tolerate failure no more.”

She grabbed her arm as the High Priestess nearly fell over, and Shannon sighed, “Now, go to bed. The lot of you.”

Bed without finishing dinner. Now there was an old tactic. Making people think over what they had done.

Antoinette turned, “Sister Eri.”

The low sister stepped over, curtsying, “Sister, High Priestess.”

Shannon smiled at her briefly, but barely seemed to notice her at all. “Help me get the High Priestess to her room.”

Eri ducked under the other arm, and they got her in the room faster than before.

Shannon flopped onto the bed, and seemingly fell asleep before Antoinette could tuck her in. She shook her head and turned, “Wait a minute, Eri.”

The sister turned, curtsying again.

Antoinette rolled her eyes, “Doors are closed. It wasn’t that long ago you shoved a sock in my mouth because of my snoring.”

Eri winced, “Apologies, Sister.”

“No.” Antoinette moaned, “Relax. Please. Do you know how weird it is for you to be acting that way around me? I’m not used to this.”

Eri smiled weakly, “I do not know what would be the proper way to behave.”

Antoinette sighed, and sat on the end of the bed, “Fine. Listen, the guards have keys to the door. I’m not... Really comfortable with that. Especially not after what just happened.”

Eri winced, “Sarin protected her.”

“No, I did.” Antoinette responded, “Sarin turned up after I got a chance to punch her in the gut. I get the feeling she likes us to help ourselves.”

Eri nodded, “That makes sense, sister.”

“So...” Antoinette frowned, “Would you mind sleeping by the door or something?”

Eri glanced at her, “Seriously? I’m a low sister. Helping you with some menial chores is one thing. Guarding the High Priestess of Ozandius? I can’t take responsibility for that!”

Antoinette shrugged, “It’ll still be my responsibility. And you’d get to sleep here, rather than with Katherine.”

Eri winced, “Yikes. The sisters might kill her.”

“I hope not.” Antoinette sighed, “That’d seriously suck. Can you imagine the paperwork?”

Eri glared, “She may be a total bitch, but she’s still a living person.”

Antoinette shrugged, “Sorry, I’m a bit bitter. She nearly gouged my eye out. Sarin healed me.”

Eri nodded slowly, and bit the end of her thumb, thinking, “I guess I could stay. If it would help protect the High Priestess, I should.”

Antoinette nodded, and pointed at a chair, "You can wedge that under the door handle if you want."

She walked over and opened one of the drawers, pulling out a spare blanket and tossing it over to the sister, "Will this work?"

"Holy crap." Eri swore, "This is so soft. I am so jealous. The bed's worse, isn't it?"

Antoinette nodded as she took off her shirt slowly, revealing her scarred back, "Yeah. And this isn't the biggest room. It's sort of crazy. Hopefully we can find a way to make the trickle-down effect trickle a bit more."

Eri sighed, spreading out the blanket and lying on it near the door, "Hopefully... Say, Antoinette. You've never really been modest, right?"

She shrugged, dropping her skirt to the floor, "Depends what you mean. I'd probably blush if there was a guy in here."

"Your back." Eri stated, "What happened?"

Antoinette crawled into her side of the bed, letting the pillow fluff up around her face, "Well, some of them were Sister Katherine. One was Sister Elba. I think one came from Margarite."

"You can just say you don't want to talk about it." Eri replied.

"I was getting there." Antoinette sighed, "It's... From my old life. Before I came here."

"Oh." Eri replied, dropping the subject.

That was something that Antoinette wanted to change. She wasn't sure if she should. If it was something she was allowed to do. Shannon was meant to be the quaker. She was just supposed to be a tool to get things done.

"It was my uncle." Antoinette said softly, "He was a real asshole."

Eri laughed despite herself, "Sorry."

She shrugged, "And as for the bed... Holy hellfire this is comfortable. Wake me up around dawn, okay?"

Shannon

Something tickled her face, and she sniffer, fighting the urge to sneeze. She was warm, and it was dark, and the sisters weren't screaming at her yet, so there was absolutely no way she was abandoning the bed. She snuggled further in, pausing as she felt the weight of the blanket over her. It didn't feel like her cloak. Did one of the other sisters take pity on her?

She cracked open one of her eyes blearily, and stared straight into a pair of dazzling green eyes. Antoinette. She rolled over, attempting to ignore her, and then realised she was on something soft. Not the hard floors of the tiled dormitory.

She sat up in a fright as all the memories came pouring back.

She wasn't a low sister, not anymore. Instead she had everyone looking to burn her at the stake. She was the new figurehead of the temple, and war was about to erupt on multiple fronts.

And she'd kissed Antoinette.

"Morning, High Priestess." A familiar voice called, and Shannon yanked the blanket up around herself, blushing, "When did I lose my clothes?"

Eri laughed from where she was sitting next to the doorway, "Told you she wouldn't remember."

Shannon glared sideways at Antoinette, who was busy pulling on her stockings, "What don't I remember?"

The blonde shrugged nonchalantly, "Nothing important."

She glared at her, twitching, "Do you want me to be in a bad mood all day?"

Antoinette laughed, "And what would the difference to normal be?"

A pillow hit the back of her head.

She turned slowly, grinning at her, "Eri and I helped bathe you half an hour ago. You fell straight back to sleep. But, it's time to get up. We're already late to morning prayers, and well, there's no priestess anymore."

Shannon fell backwards moaning.

Eri tried to stifle a giggle, and actively failed. Shannon sighed, "Fine. Um... Can I get dressed, then?"

Antoinette sat over her, "Well, you see... Eri?"

"The upper sisters came with the ceremonial robes. Apparently they used to dress the priestess every morning. We sent them away, but had to agree to help you out ourselves." Eri shrugged, "Apparently it is now beneath you to dress yourself."

"Screw off." Shannon replied, glaring.

Eri laughed, "I intend to. I'm going to sit here, enjoying doing nothing, and you can dress yourself."

Antoinette held up a set of robes emblazoned with silver and gold thread. Shannon looked at her, "I am not wearing that."

The blonde shrugged, "Your funeral."

Shannon sighed, "I know I need to pick my battles, but I am not going to become some asshole of a priestess just because that's what everyone wants me to be. Isn't it bad enough I have to stand

up and speak just because people expect me to speak? Not like I have anything new to say most of the time. The temple has served Sarin for generations. There isn't always going to be something new to say."

Eri grinned, "You know, you might not make a half-bad High Priestess."

Shannon glared at her, "So... Why are you here, again?"

"She watched the door for me." Antoinette answered quickly, "Until we can get the locks changed."

Shannon nodded slowly, "Makes sense. So you're Antoinette's favourite helper now. Any idea what that means?"

"That I totally did not see the High Priestess cuddling the Head of Discipline. And she certainly doesn't snore." Eri said as straight-faced as possible.

Shannon shook her head, grabbing a pair of nickers from Antoinette and putting them on under the covers, "It means you're in for a promotion. Of sorts. You'll also hate it. Antoinette is in charge of more than just discipline."

Eri frowned, "Oh. I think you're right. I'm going to hate this, aren't I?"

Shannon smiled at her, "I've promised the King a set of Inquisitors, to help keep the local laws."

Eri went white, "Inquisitors? Like the people who torture?"

"If necessary." Shannon replied, "Which it rarely should be. Unless you're dealing with someone like Katherine."

Eri looked at the ground, as if her whole world was coming crashing down. Which gave Shannon an opportunity to quickly put on her bra. She pulled the dress over her head and stepped out of the bed, stretching. "It means I'm going to empower you to keep the peace. To hunt out the rebels that Katherine has been making. To try and stop this whole city blowing up in our faces."

"I already know some of them." Eri said slowly, "I don't want to be involved."

Shannon nodded, "Which is why you are. Your brother is the right place to start."

"No!" Eri snapped, and then winced, realising who she was talking to.

She knew why she was upset. "I don't want you to hurt anyone, Eri. Locking people up or executing them or whatever isn't going to calm anything down. It'll just make things worse. I want to talk to the rebels. Understand why they're pissed, and try and fix it. We're not the king. We've fired Katherine. We're new. Which means we'll have a small opportunity to prove ourselves."

Eri looked at her, "You're still putting me against my brother."

"No." Shannon shook her head, "I'm asking you to become your brother's voice as one of my advisers. Offer it to him. If he turns you down, I'll drop it. But I need to know he wants. What they all want. I've been in the temple for over a decade. I don't know what it's like out there, and the way things are going, the other sisters are going to do their best to make sure I don't know what the streets are like."

Eri nodded sullenly, "How did you know my brother was one?"

"Red?" Shannon asked, "He's always been a firebrand. Always pissed off at one thing or another."

Eri blinked, "Red? You know him... How?"

Shannon pulled her hair back into a bun, and then made an angry face.

Eri's jaw dropped, "No way. No way. You were Lil Sass?"

Shannon shrugged, and Antoinette raised an eyebrow, "Lil Sass? Seriously? You were known for talking back on the streets? Just how bad were you before you met me?"

The High Priestess rolled her eyes, and donned her hood reluctantly, "I guess you'll find out now I've got no one to talk back to apart from a goddess."

Eri stood up quickly, and Antoinette sighed heavily, "So. Morning prayers, and then breakfast. How are we going to handle this?"

Shannon shrugged, "Badly. Punishment of an elder, followed by me supposed to be making some speech about how glad I am that I was born and how I'm the only one who can fix any problems and so the temple needs me."

Eri nodded, "Never understood why the priestess used to say that at breakfast. Shouldn't we be thankful to Sarin? Not her?"

"Not a bad idea." Shannon smiled, "Anyways... I can't put this off anymore."

Mytris

He could hear them. The drumbeat of the street. The people outside the walls, in the courtyard. They weren't protesting, they weren't making demands, but they weren't moving either. They were standing in unity, in silence. It was having an interesting effect on the palace. The guards were jumpy, faster to lash out. Faster to strike down those they didn't consider to be their equal.

That's the way these things always start. A few angry men, that was all it took. A few people, pushed down and ignored. A few people, beaten the moment they tried to speak out. You can't maintain control by denying people their freedom. In the end all you served as was inspiration to take it back. You showed them world could be better, because they were forced to imagine a world without you in it.

In the end, they always tried to make that dream come true.

In the end, they always died.

And nothing changed.

They replaced bad with worse, or they died and were forgotten. There wasn't another choice. That was the problem with trying solve things with violence. You inspire others to do the same. Others with less hope in their hearts. But just as much desperation. Desperation without the wisdom to know when to use it. There was time to speak, and a time to fight, and knowing the difference made you either a terrorist or a hero.

Mytris glanced at the reflection of the shield he was polishing on the wall. He could see behind him into the waiting room. Those waiting to speak to the king. Most wouldn't get in. They'd be dismissed, sometimes with an answer, sometimes not. Yet, there was a face there that shouldn't be. He couldn't imagine any good purpose for that man's presence.

He was the brother of Sister Eri. On the streets he earned the name 'Red'. Like most street names, it reflected a single entirely embarrassing moment that would never be allowed to be forgotten. And meant exactly nothing towards the character of he was. His face had turned red after he walked in on his elder sister with a boy. They had not been wrestling.

He wasn't that timid these days. Mytris figured if the same thing were to happen today, Red might just castrate the man on the spot, never mind if it was consensual or not. That was the kind of person he was. Brutal. A man living by his own rules in a world that wasn't remotely compatible with them. Red did whatever he had to do. For him, the means always justified the ends. And the ends always served his own purpose.

Yet, maybe that wasn't all bad. The king sat in his castle, seeing so few people, preparing to fight a war he couldn't possibly win. He'd turned away help of a mythic scale. He threatened and spat obscenities towards a woman that helped bring an entire city to its knees in the space of a day. A woman who had somehow managed to resurrect that city from the ashes.

Someone willing to deal with the Fae would go far towards ensuring peace. No matter the atrocities that Yurk sent their way, there was a limit to their strength. There was a limit to how much damage they could do. That wasn't as true about the Fae. It certainly wasn't true of either their king or queen. He could hardly imagine the worlds of the Fae. Entire worlds united under one banner. One king, one queen.

Humanity had never been that united, not once in their entire history.

They'd never had a tyrant powerful enough, or a king kind enough, to unite their people for a

single cause. Yet when people from worlds that enlightened came to them, humanity tossed them aside like they were nothing. They outlawed speaking about them. They demonised their memories. Turning the Fae into child-eating fanatics of the dark. This was what humanity was good at.

Pretending the past had never happened before.

Taking something perfect, and shattering it to pieces.

Mytris looked away, turning back to his work. If Red had come to destroy this place, he didn't care. It was about time someone did something about it. Violence wasn't an answer, he knew that. There was no fixing this problem. The fix was to just let humanity get it over with. To let everyone kill each other, down to the last man, woman and child. Let the world of humans be forgotten.

They didn't deserve to live here.

Antoinette

It was obvious that Katherine had kept too tight a hand on the reins, as soon as she entered the main hall. A few of the devout citizens had come to join the prayers, like usual. The sisters had all lined up, like usual. But there was no one praying, despite how late to the party they were arriving. They were all just gossiping and wondering if someone should stand up and start.

However, on the other hand, it probably meant that no one was about to try seizing power from Shannon. Which meant less work for her, which was nice.

Shannon was surprising her. She wasn't sure just how formal the woman was going to be. How strongly she'd enforce her title. Was it just a convenient excuse to be able to get things done? Was she still that cheeky street kid under all of it? She refused to wear the robes of an elder sister. Wearing the cheap garments of a low sister. They were patched, repeatedly, and badly. You could trace Shannon's knowledge of sewing just with a cursory look, and you could tell it still wasn't one of her skills.

Then Shannon would turn around and pull out a new miracle. A blessing of the goddess. Power that made her rival any mage or warlock. Power that could be used for incredible evil, or fantastic good. Power that could help shift the balance in the region.

Shannon was Sarin's trump card. Antoinette was getting the feeling it was because none of Sarin's enemies would be able to predict her. She wasn't some hero created by the gods. She really was just an ordinary person, with the power to do extraordinary things. That was the thing. Shannon hadn't changed. All that had changed was that no one could hit her when she talked back now. And now they had to listen to her.

The High Priestess paused in front of the hall, waiting for silence. Most of the sisters didn't seem to have noticed her. It was probably the outfit. Antoinette went to raise her voice, but Shannon glared at her. She stopped. Apparently waiting was the plan. What was Shannon up to this time? Trying to teach everyone to notice the low sisters?

She looked down at her own outfit. It was that of an upper sister now. The blue thread had been replaced with silver. Actual silver. The clothes she was wearing were probably worth a hundred-weight in gold. It didn't feel right. Not when the temple was struggling to supply food. Relying on donations to feed the low sisters. Shannon had made the right choice. She hadn't even considered rejecting the advice of the other upper sisters. Maybe that was the problem. She still saw her self as lower than them. It seemed like Shannon was thriving in her role. She knew who she was.

Antoinette didn't know who she was.

For most of her life, she'd thought of herself as a princess hiding from assassination. She'd never been certain that the temple really would be her whole life. That had changed now. Shannon knew she was a princess, and simply did not care. But she did care about her. Shannon would be bound to the temple for eternity. She was the first High Priestess. A role that had been promised, but never filled. If Shannon was here, then Antoinette wanted to be. She wanted to help her. To stand by her side, even when things got bad.

That was a confusing feeling.

One of the low sisters noticed Shannon, and squeaked. They went silent, and fell to their knees. Antoinette couldn't help but smile as it rippled through the crowd. Except for the elder sisters. Those idiots still thought Shannon was beneath them. Below them. They were the real power in the temple. Not Sarin, not any appointed leader, but them. She was itching to prove them wrong. Yet,

Shannon said she needed some of them.

Shannon sighed, crossing her arms, "It would be around now, that usually, we would turn to the priestess for guidance, and she would speak a prayer, and we would echo it. But we can't. We have no priestess, because she failed us. Failed Sarin. I am your High Priestess, and I could fill that role. I could speak words that have meaning to me, and you could echo empty words back. Empty, and meaningless. They mean nothing to Sarin, and nothing to you."

Antoinette looked sideways at her. Whilst it was undoubtedly true, it was also a five hundred year old tradition, from before the founding of Ozandius. Was Shannon really planning on ripping out all the traditions? If she did, the sisters would start leaving the temple. Establish a new one, and reject her. That kind of political divide couldn't be helpful, not with what was coming their way.

"What matters most, is the heart." Shannon smiled, "So we will hear from the heart. I will name three sisters, and we will hear their prayers. They will speak to Sarin, and we will do nothing but listen."

Antoinette felt a chill run down her spin. Shannon was removing the middle man. No sister prayed directly to Sarin. They prayed to saints, or echoed the words of the priestess. No one had a right to pray directly to the goddess. They meant nothing. Well, she had to admit she sometimes prayed directly, but she was an arrogant little idiot.

Shannon grinned, "Sister Rin."

The redhead stood slowly, nervously, tucking one of her bangs into her cowl and stepped forward timidly. She paused, unsure of whether to bow or not, in front of Shannon. She smiled at her, taking one of her hands, "There's something you want to ask. Just say it. There's no need to dress up your words. Just ask Sarin exactly what you want to. You're not going to be punished for speaking from the heart."

Rin nodded and swallowed nervously as the room went silent in anticipation. "I... Lady... Goddess... Please. Take care of Eri."

The redhead ran back into the group of low sisters, hiding her face.

Shannon smiled at her, and then something grabbed her attention. Antoinette took a step back instinctively, just as she exploded. "Get over here, Sister Fran!"

The crowd turned to the elder sister, who glided over as if she hadn't a care in the world. As if her whole world wasn't threatening to come crashing down on her head. Antoinette could see the look in Shannon's eye. She was barely holding back. A hairs-breadth from unleashing a torrent of completely uncontrolled anger. Except in this case it wouldn't be the anger of an ineffectual low sister who could be whipped for speaking out. It would be the unimpeded wrath of a god.

Fran nodded gently, "Yes, child?"

"You're a real piece of shit." Shannon snapped, and Antoinette felt her face go red. She felt the whole room holding their breath. Shannon continued, glaring, "You're insulted that a sister expressed her heart to the goddess? Explain yourself."

Sister Fran twitched, but just smoothed her dress calmly, "The low sister you called has been caught in a number of compromising situations. You say she prayed with her heart, I say she prayed out of lust. A lust that she should look to fixing before she dares to speak to the goddess, child."

Shannon rolled her jaw, obviously biting her cheek, and then spoke slowly, "Your heart is the one that took offence, Fran. All that was in Sister Rin's heart was compassion for another. Concern

that her Sister is now placed in harm's way, by serving the goddess. Placed into harms way, because she expects elder sisters like you to act out. To act without compassion. To act without mercy. To look for an excuse to hurt those the goddess is choosing to elevate. Your heart is the one that is an insult to Sarin."

Fran blinked, as if she hadn't expected this kind of public outpouring, even after being sworn at. "I am sorry you feel so, child."

"Enough!" Shannon shouted, "We have no need of you, Fran. If you are unwillingly to learn or change, then leave. I don't need you for the war. So, get out."

The elder sister rolled her eyes, and Antoinette clenched her fists. That was the wrong move. The stupidest thing this old bat could do. Was Shannon going to decapitate her? Kill her, here and now for disrespecting the goddess? When she got this angry... Antoinette never knew what she was going to do. Sometimes it was something simple, something quiet. Like your sheets disappearing. Sometimes it was loud and angry as Shannon showed that the streets taught her how to actually use a fist.

A cube of golden light flickered around the elder sister, and Shannon turned away slowly, as the cube picked up the sister, knocking her off her feet. Fran was saying something, screaming something, but no sound was emerging from the barrier. The cube raced through the front doors of the hall, and Antoinette stared in shock. Shannon had just expelled an elder sister.

The High Priestess looked around the crowd, "Thankyou, Sister Rin. You have shown us how we should pray. With our heart, in thankful hope to Sarin. There are two more that Sarin wishes to hear from. Sister Margarite, if you would."

The upper sister looked up in shock, and timidly stepped forward. This was surprising. She'd helped Antoinette out, of course, but with how far the elders were from what Sarin wanted, could an upper sister really be worth listening to? Maybe that was the point. Maybe they hadn't been corrupted yet. Maybe they were doing the best they could in a crappy hierarchy of authority.

The upper sister curtsied, "I don't know what to say, High Priestess. I am no one. There is no need for the goddess to turn her eye to me."

Shannon grinned at her, putting an arm around her and squeezing, "You're cute. Cute, but dead wrong. Sarin knows you. She's the one who asked for you. Not me. She wanted to hear about your brother, again."

Margarite's eyes widened.

Antoinette looked at the upper sister with concern. Her brother? No one in the temple was supposed to have a family. They were supposed to have given that all up. To forget their old life. A brother wouldn't make sense.

Margarite smiled timidly, looking at the floor, "Thankyou, goddess, for guiding me. I pray that you watch over my brother, and that if he no longer lives, you welcome him into your embrace. If he lives, I know he can be impetuous, and stupid. Yet guide him in your light. Bring him closer to you, and further from the hatred he feels so deeply for those who have hurt him."

The sister curtsied, and quietly moved back to a group of upper sisters.

Shannon smiled over at her, beaming. "Do you want an answer, Sister Margarite?"

The woman looked over in shock, and Shannon shrugged, "He lives. He lives at the palace, as a servant boy. He's still as impetuous as ever, but time is beginning to temper him. He even has a

crush or two. He does still struggle with his anger daily. Yet he seeks to be better. He even comes to this temple every now and then, though you haven't had a chance to see him yet."

Margarite bit her hand, tears forming in her eyes. Shannon grinned, "In fact, he's with us today."

The sisters all spun to look at the visitors, come to pay their respects and arriving instead into this completely new kind of morning prayer, looking at them with anticipation.

Antoinette looked across their faces, scanning quickly those she knew from the palace. She stopped, looking at one boyish face, "You have got to be kidding."

"Mytris, stand by your sister." Shannon said softly, breaking one of the strongest traditions the temple had.

The boy stood up nervously and Antoinette shook her head. How did she not know that he had a sister? A sister at the temple, no less. She'd been so caught up in seeing him as a rival for Shannon that she hadn't tried to learn much about him. All she knew was he was a street kid. Most street kids either became slaves, servants, or they went to the temple.

So precious and delicate Margarite... Was a street kid, like Shannon?

It didn't make sense to her. Margarite was like fragile porcelain. Her movements were slow and regal. She was every part an upper sister. Had she really been a rough nut who used to run through the marketplace, snatching food and wallets? Antoinette could not reconcile the image.

Mytris hugged his sister, but she was openly uncomfortable. Her mind was probably spinning at the rules of association.

Shannon smiled, "You two should spend some time together this morning, if you can. Remembering who we were helps us to become a better version of who we can be. Our devotion is still to Sarin. Yet, if you can be Sarin's light in your brother's life, then you should be. Gods know he needs it."

Antoinette shook her head, smiling. Shannon really did have a great way of re-expressing the truths they'd all known. Of showing them they were wrong, but only wrong in interpretation.

Shannon turned back to the crowd, "Finally, we need to hear from you, Sister Elba."

The elder sister looked up in surprise, and then curtsied and walked around to the front of the crowd slowly. Antoinette could already see some of the younger sisters switching off. The elder sisters were long-winded, even when they were lecturing you and threatening to hit you. And Elba was one of the worst. Her philosophy classes were a fight with boredom, a fight so intense some sisters joked you would die if you fell asleep in her class. Because it was so hard not to.

Elba smiled softly, "High Priestess. I have so many worries. What does the goddess ask of me?"

"Hope." Shannon replied.

The gentle elder nodded and closed her eyes, bowing her head, "Sarin, oh goddess. Guide my path, guide my words. So many sisters look to me, and I to them. I do not know if I have the wisdom to teach them in these times. I struggle so hard to know what it is that you want for us. I do not know if you even know my name or asked that I remain your faithful servant. This temple has your guidance, I am not sure mine is up to the task. Yet even now, I know you are watching. I thank you for it. For bringing clarity where there was none. For bringing fire back to our hearts. For reminding us that we do not serve tradition, or protocol. That we serve a goddess who has fought across the worlds, and loved across the timelines. That we serve a woman who is always

willing to do what is right. Show us, please, goddess. Show us what must be, what must not be, and what can be. Open our eyes to your possibilities.”

Antoinette felt a chill. Elba was getting fired up. That wasn’t to say she didn’t still have an irritating monotone. She did. But she also was getting excited about throwing tradition to the wind. Excited to see what the temple could be.

The blonde shook her head, smiling. So that was it, then. Elba was going to be an inquisitor. The same with Margarite and Rin. These were the women that Sarin had chosen to be her fighting force out there, in the world. It’d be interesting having both Eri and Rin on the same team. They were always close friends, but that friendship could get in the way of doing what had to be done. She’d be in charge of making sure the both of them worked rather than gossiped.

Shannon sighed, “Unfortunately, sisters, we do not end on a high note. Sister Rath, step forward.”

The elder sister moved forward timidly, accompanied by Emilia.

The other elder sister curtsied to the crowd, and then spoke, “Sister Rath took into her own hands to discipline. This is not the case anymore. Discipline belongs to Sister Antoinette, and any she sees fit to appoint. Even an elder sister is not exempt from the rules that govern this temple. That would be heresy, placing them above the goddess.”

Emilia turned, pulling off the sister’s cowl, her old hands hesitating, “Sister Rath, you are hereby demoted to Upper Sister, if that is the wish of the goddess.”

Shannon nodded, sealing any hope of a reprieve, “That is the mercy of the goddess.”

Emilia curtsied again and left, and Shannon waved a hand, “Join your sisters, Sister Rath.”

The elder nodded, obviously fighting to control her emotions, and walked over to the main group of upper sisters, who did not seem like they were about to welcome her with open arms. It couldn’t be helped.

Antoinette sighed, “I am the one to whom discipline belongs, now. No elder may strike a sister. Neither may a low sister take advantage of another. I will not have this bullying, not by anyone. Is that clear?”

The crowd snapped to attention, murmuring, and Antoinette glared, “I did not hear you, sisters. Have I been clear?”

There was a shouted response and she nodded. Noting that the upper sisters had let Rath into their ranks, albeit only so they could appear in straight lines. Better than nothing. Her threat had been heard.

Shannon sighed, “And now sisters, I must leave you. Go to your tasks, the day awaits.”

Falien

He woke up as his head hit the ground, and he moaned.

The prince glared up at the general leaning over him, the man was practically foaming at the mouth, and apparently in mid-rant. He didn't particularly care. It had been worth it. He stood up, dusting himself off, and turned to smile at the five women he'd managed to get into the hammock with him. Every one of them was perfect, without blemish. It had been an enjoyable evening.

He felt a sword point at the back of his neck, "Where the hell did you even get them?!"

Falien shrugged, "Two are soldiers, one is from a nearby farm, and the other two are from the village down the road."

The general spun him around, "You walked into enemy territory to find someone to fuck!?"

Falien blinked, "No, she did."

The general glared at one of the women who was trying to surreptitiously put her armour back on. Her face was crimson, as well as other parts. Falien smiled at her. He had an effect on people, an effect he didn't fully understand, but appreciated all the same. It wasn't just that no one could hurt him with a blade. No one could disappoint him.

The general grabbed him by the throat, dragging him out into the wind and ice. He tossed him against a nearby post, and a soldier grabbed his wrists, binding them with leather to the post.

Falien yawned.

He heard the crack of the whip. He felt the spines as each of nine flailing pieces of leather slapped into his back. Felt the metal in each piece shatter as it struck him. The whip was pulled back, and cracked again. He wondered whether another man might be screaming by this point. Another man would be missing half the skin covering his back. For him, he just felt like his balls were cold.

The whip cracked, again and again.

Falien leaned on the post, resting his throbbing head. At least they hadn't commented about the alcohol yet.

Verity

She should have paid attention. Should have noticed it.

Verity sat in her tent, whilst the others slept nearby, but she couldn't. Not after what she'd done.

The prince had just asked her, outright. He'd asked her to find playthings to fuck. And she'd instantly melted. It was as if her own will meant nothing at all. She'd been excited to help him. She'd been honoured to have him bed her.

Now she felt sick.

She might have lost her gift. Because she gave her first time to a man who meant nothing. A man who crooked his finger and made her jump. He smiled, and she did as she was told. Happily. That was the most disturbing part of it all. She'd never felt euphoria like she had when he'd smiled at her. Never felt so happy to be alive as when she was in his arms.

Verity rolled over, vomiting into the bucket by the bed again.

The prince was beyond dangerous. She didn't know what he was. Something wrong, that was certain. A creature that could bend the wills of all others to his command at a single thought. His word was law. Not the law of men, but the law of nature. If he desired it, then it would happen. It didn't matter who got caught up in it. Innocence didn't matter to that piece of shit. He hadn't even appreciated it.

She gave him her first, but to him, it was nothing more than an evening's entertainment. She was ashamed, beaten and broken. Because a man dared to smile in her direction. She'd never given anything to anyone before. Never felt anything like what he'd made her felt.

She craved it. Despite her anger at herself, she wanted to go back to him. To beg him to show her those feelings all over again. She knew if she saw him, she'd do anything to win his approval.

He was a monster. He deserved to die, if not for his own callousness, then for the safety of everyone else.

The whipping had been pointless. Nothing broke the skin of that man. He was above them, beyond them. Isolated from everyone else by the curse. The same curse that meant he sought out pleasure over everything else. The same curse that meant the pleasure did nothing but cause collateral damage.

Damage like herself.

She wanted to hurt herself. Just to feel okay. To feel okay with what had happened.

She closed her eyes, crying.

Shannon

She leaned against the wall, pressing the cool surface against her forehead as she breathed raggedly. That had been pure and utter terror for her. Expelling Sister Fran had taken its toll, and not just because of the miracle. She'd nearly wet herself in fear, expecting the elders to protest and to rise against her. Yet, they hadn't. They'd stood and watched silently.

"High Priestess?"

She straightened and turned, smiling as she saw Eri, "Sister. Can I help you?"

Eri curtsied, "I was only going to ask if you were alright."

"Nope." Shannon said, nearly bursting into tears, "Not at all. I hate this job. I hate what it makes me have to do. Hate how it paints a giant target on my face."

Eri smiled, glancing around to make sure the other sisters weren't listening and stepped closer, taking her hand, "Thank you, for today. I mean it. Thank you for what you did for Rin. Not just Fran. She's had it coming. For asking to hear her prayer. Even if it was about me."

Shannon tossed up a barrier around the two, flinching at the effort, "There's been something I've been meaning to ask you about that, Eri."

The sister tapped a fist on the barrier, "Huh. So nobody can hear. I guess this is important."

"More... Awkward." Shannon sighed, "You know Rin likes you as more than just a friend, right?"

"I do." Eri said nervously, "But I don't. I like guys. In fact, I like a particular guy. I know... We're not supposed to like people. Married to Sarin and the temple. So... I don't like Rin like that, but I do like our friendship. It would suck if she couldn't be around me. We have talked about it. We're at the awkward phase. We both know what the other wants, and we're trying to figure out a balance. To get along, without everything falling apart."

Shannon smiled, "You're sweet, Eri. I can see why Rin likes you. A kind heart."

Eri frowned, "So. The girl-love thing won't be a problem."

"It isn't a problem." Shannon replied, "Sarin was telling Antoinette and I about having girlfriends the other night. Apparently that passage is about whores. She wants you to commit to love and life, rather than sleeping around."

Eri laughed, "Oh wow. Good luck teaching the elders that one."

Shannon rubbed her forehead, "Oh, you have no idea."

Eri's jaw dropped, "No way. You and Antoinette? Seriously? Is that why you're sharing a room?"

Shannon went bright red, "No! It wasn't like that! I just... Didn't want to be alone. But then Antoinette was all handsy, and so stupid. She didn't even notice me flirting back... We kissed... And then Katherine interrupted... And I haven't even had a chance to talk to her. To see if she regrets it. To see what she and I... If there even is a she and I."

Eri shook her head, grinning, "This is something I could stand to hear more about. You two... Wow. That would be a cute couple. And a serious power couple. The unbiased hand of justice, and the Avatar of the Goddess. That's kinda freaking amazing."

Shannon sighed, "You know about Mytris and Antoinette, right?"

Eri shrugged, “He’s crushing on her. That’s nothing new. I thought you were over that, after the slimesnails in her breakfast.”

Shannon blushed, rubbing the back of her neck, “I forgot about that one. I really was mean, wasn’t I?”

“Everyone thought it was because you were jealous. Mytris being your childhood friend and all.” Eri shook her head, a smile fixed on her face, “But it’s because you were jealous of Mytris. That he was taking Antoinette from you. Right?”

“Yep.” Shannon whispered awkwardly, “But... His feelings aren’t entirely unreturned, Eri.”

“Girl.” Eri sighed, “You can’t worry about other people like that. It’s just going to end up hurting you. Antoinette is totally into you. And you’ve successfully distracted Mytris by reintroducing him to his sister. That’s not something you need to worry about for a while.”

“I have my reasons.” Shannon sighed, “And in fact, you’re probably going to be kinda pissed at me.”

Eri glared, “What?”

“I need to leave the temple for a while.” Shannon sighed, “This morning’s mail. Apparently a temple in the south has followed through with the hate speech that Katherine was preaching. They’ve seized the town. Started killing people they call nonbelievers. Pretending everyone they kill was a mage or some shit.”

Eri flinched, “Crap. I didn’t realise things were that bad.”

Shannon scoffed, “Eri, that might happen here whilst I’m away. My inquisitors get to keep the peace. You, Antoinette, Margarite and Elba.”

Eri scratched the back of her neck, “Oh. You’re taking Rin with you.”

Shannon nodded, “I need her. I don’t why, but I do. I’m also taking Sister Emilia.”

Eri winced, “Yikes. She’s your best advocate amongst the elders right now. So... You’re leaving, and the city and the temple are both right on a knife edge. Do you really have to go? Can’t you send inquisitors to deal with this? Not that I want to go, mind you.”

“No.” Shannon sighed, “The king wants my personal intervention, as proof I’m actually not trying to bring the kingdom down. It’s our temple that’s rebelled, and I’m supposed to be the High Priestess.”

Eri sighed, “Damn. Wait. Why am I going to hate this? Rin and I can get along fine without each other for a few days.”

“Antoinette is going to hit the roof.” Shannon replied slowly, “Like I said. We kissed, we haven’t talked, and now I’m leaving and putting her in charge. It doesn’t matter if I explain it to her, she’s getting mixed signals.”

Eri glared, “Oh. And I’m her favourite.”

Shannon smiled sheepishly.

Eri shook her head, “You know, I actually want it to work out between you two. Someone deserves to be happy.”

Shannon tapped her chin, “So... Eri... Did I mention I can hear thoughts now?”

The girl turned bright red, looking down, “Damn. Damn. Damn.”

“Why are you hiding it?” Shannon asked, “He’s a total hottie. I used to get chills when I’d ask him something when he was thinking, and he’d look up all angry.”

Eri smiled sheepishly, “Yeah. That’s how we met. I asked him for directions whilst he was fantasising about killing the king or something. That guy... He’s just got such a crazy dark side to him. He’s so much stronger than he lets anyone know.”

Shannon grinned, “That he does. And that’s why you know about Antoinette and Mytris.”

Eri glared, “Yeah. Because you know, I have to say a few things. First, I haven’t told anybody. At all. Please, do not tell anyone. Or you might end up with a dozen ratspiders in your bed.”

Shannon laughed, “Point taken. I won’t... Well... Antoinette might be able to weasel it out of me. I’ll try and not say.”

Eri rolled her eyes, “Second, what the heck did you mean by feelings weren’t entirely unreturned?”

Shannon frowned, “Huh. So your crush is my threat. This could end up really bad, couldn’t it? Uh... Antoinette kissed him once. Under the bridge, at new years.”

Eri looked devastated, staring at her, “What? So they really did kiss when they disappeared?”

“Yeah.” Shannon sighed, “I caught them. Antoinette tried to joke about it, saying something about him being a bad kisser... I think, now, that she was mostly hurt that it was me who caught them. That she’d given up hope, and then there I was reminding her of everything she felt.”

Eri sighed, leaning against the wall, “I guess. Antoinette is way too forward. I can’t even think of arranging a date. Not with the traditions here. I don’t want to get myself hurt like that. Married to the temple, right?”

“Screw that.” Shannon replied, “Heart matters, Eri. If you like Mytris... The guy is too thick to notice. You’ll have to tell him. And I want you to at least try and have one date before I get back. That’s an order.”

Eri laughed, smiling at her, “Come again?”

“Order issued.” Shannon teased, standing up, “But people are starting to look. I should get going.”

The low sister nodded, “I guess. I’ll try.”

“You better.” Shannon replied, dropping the barrier.

It had been nice to talk to Eri again, like they were both just sisters. As if the entire world wasn’t riding on her shoulders. She pulled the letter out of one of her hidden pockets, turning it over in her hands. The king’s courier had waited for the prayer service to end, and then immediately given it to her. He was waiting to take an answer back. She couldn’t keep him waiting much longer.

She sighed, moving over to where the man was waiting, “I will be accompanied by two sisters. We will leave at midday.”

The courier nodded, and sprinted out the doorway.

Shannon resisted the urge to clench her fists. She didn’t know what was coming, not all of it, but she knew it would be bad. Beyond bad. The temple would never be like this again. When she came back, the whole world would be different. She knew that, even if she wasn’t quite sure how she knew. Prophecy wasn’t one of the seven miracles that Sarin had given to her.

She thought as she walked, pausing near the foot of the stairs to the upper rooms, and then

turned, looking around. A low sister paused by her, out of breath and carrying firewood, “May I help you, High Priestess?”

“Sister... Lily, wasn’t it?” Shannon smiled at her.

“Yes, High Priestess.” The girl bobbed, and Shannon nodded, “I’m looking for Sisters Emilia and Rin. Could you get someone to send them to my bed chambers?”

The girl nodded, sprinting off.

It’d take a few moments for the sisters to be found, and sent on their way. It’d pass from low sister to low sister. It was inefficient, but effective. And it gave her time to walk back to the bedroom, alone.

She needed the time to think.

To understand just how bad things were about to get. All she wanted to do was run into the hills for a week with Antoinette, but she knew that also wasn’t an option. This rebellion in the south was terrifying. It was as if someone had turned the temple into their own personal machine of hate and violence. She knew she wouldn’t be accepted as High Priestess when she arrived. Whoever had convinced these people to turn against the core beliefs of Sarin would simply label her a mage. A magic user. And it would all be over.

Shannon didn’t understand why the temple hated magic. Sarin’s miracles were magic, too. They had a different source, but they were magic. She could feel it. They were just sort of magic with oversight, requiring Sarin to personally grant them. It was almost as if the miracles had been intended as a way to teach how to properly use magic, and then once they were mastered, the temple was going to be taught how to use real magic.

Like training wheels on a child’s bike.

Instead, it had been turned into some perverted idea that any magic not directly granted by Sarin was evil incarnate. The rise of hate, again. It always found a way to sneak in. Poisoning hearts and minds against themselves. That’s all hate was. A self-destructive trait that would end up burning yourself more than anyone else around you.

Shannon opened her door and headed over to the wardrobe, opening it and looking at the clothes with a glare. Someone had replace all her stuff with golden and silver robes that she was tempted to sell. They could each feed the whole temple for a month. Why did they keep trying to force these things on her?

“High Priestess.”

She turned, waving the three sisters in.

Emilia turned, indicating the low sister with a tray of food, “I noticed you had not eaten yet, Priestess.”

Shannon smiled, taking the tray, “Thank you. Sister... I’m sorry, I don’t think I’ve met you.”

The girl bobbed, “Sister Eliza, Priestess.”

Shannon nodded, “I have a bit of an odd request, and a tight timetable for it. Do you know the market on Dawsy street?”

The low sister nodded in confusion, “Run by the Black Jack.”

“That’s the one.” Shannon replied, “I need you to run a list of items passed Jack, see if he can’t help out.”

She pulled out one of the robes and folded it up, "That'll cover the payment."

Eliza took it, and a letter, then curtsied and ran. She probably want to get it over and done with. Nobody wanted to spend more time than was necessary around Black Jack. He ran the streets, the games and the whores. All of it was his, and he was absolutely ruthless and without mercy.

Emilia raised an eyebrow, and Shannon sat on the edge of her bed. "Close the door."

Rin shut it slowly, and then turned back, so nervous her hands were beginning to shake. She knew the feeling well.

"The temple at Fasfeen has rebelled." Shannon began, her eyebrows knitting together, "Early reports are sketchy on detail, but suggest at least twelve people have been executed by those in charge of the temple. Executed for heresy, and the practice of magic."

Emilia didn't say anything, but her entire demeanour darkened. Rin winced, "Oh crap."

Shannon sighed, leaning back on her hands, "The king has required my personal intervention. To prove that the Sisters of Sarin aren't officially supporting this, and we will stamp out any insurrection. He's not asking too much. Katherine was the one who inspired these people."

Emilia shook her head slowly, "For you to leave at this time, High Priestess... It won't go down well."

"That won't be your problem." Shannon replied, "You're coming with me. Both of you."

Rin went white and tensed up.

Emilia laughed softly, "Travel? At my age? How is that supposed to work? I'll be unable to walk by the time we arrive."

"Lady Summer is arrive in an hour." Shannon replied, "I'm going to request that she open a portal for us. We will walk directly into Fasfeen. Getting back will be harder, but we are needed there yesterday. People are dying. Murdered in the name of the goddess. I can't sit by whilst that happens, and apparently I need you two if I'm to succeed in stopping this riot from becoming a full blown rebellion movement."

Rin leaned against the wall, swallowing nervously, "Fasfeen. That's where..."

"Eri comes from." Shannon completed, "Eri's brother, currently here in the capital, is the leader of the dissident movement. She'll be talking to him, trying to negotiate, whilst we head to Fasfeen. Our efforts may compromise hers, or vice versa. I've told her to offer him a seat as one of my advisers. With Eri as the go-between. I don't want this to end in bloodshed, but it might. It just might."

Emilia sighed, "It will, there is no doubt, Priestess. Rebellions are the voices of angry people. They are not a cause, but a symptom of a problem. Unless one solves the problem, the rebellion will continue live, and to thrive. The people feel the kingdom is unjust. They are not entirely incorrect. Much wrong has occurred. By the hand of the temple, and by the hand of the king. People are afraid. They're afraid of starving. Afraid of dying, being forgotten."

"They should be." Shannon shrugged, "Look in my wardrobe. There's enough there to feed this whole temple for a year. The temple has hoarded its wealth. Prided itself on the political influence it has by being the official mouthpiece of the gods. I have every reason to believe Katherine really was hoping for this rebellion. She was feeding the flames, probably in an attempt to get the temple to take over the kingdom."

Rin looked at her, "You're sure? That seems a huge step. Even for her."

“I believe it.” Emilia interjected, and Rin shook her head, “Damn it. Politics sucks.”

Shannon smiled at her, “Which brings me to a point. You two may have guessed already. As part of my duties, I have been establishing a very small, very tight knit group of sisters, under Sister Antoinette. They will be my inquisitors. Insurrections like this one are part of the duties.”

Rin sighed, “You already roped in Sister Eri.”

“Antoinette did.” Shannon smiled, “I just didn’t argue. Both of you, from this point forward, are my inquisitors. For Rin’s benefit, I’ll break down what we’ll be doing, and why. Recently, the elfin realm of Eldrasa was taken over by a Fae. A Fae who stole the magic of the orks. She has embraced the corruption it brings, and has begun sending raiding parties from Eldrasa, to here. To this world. Orks and elfin. We don’t stand a chance against that, and Kru is turning her gaze towards Ozandius.”

Rin collapsed to the ground, staring up at her, “What the hell?”

Shannon shrugged, “That’s the threat we’re facing. One of them. We also have rebellions springing up everywhere, and Yurk is marching to war. They’ll reach our outermost borders in a few days. Ozandius does not have a huge chance of getting out of this. Which is why Sarin appointed me at all. Apparently, I’m somehow supposed to be our only hope of survival.”

Rin smiled weakly, “So that’s why. Sarin appointed a street kid, who can get things done. She knows you’ll ignore the rules that get in the way. That you will do whatever it takes to get the sisters through this. That you’ll protect us, even if our rules demand we surrender.”

Shannon shrugged, “I don’t know why she chose me. I don’t have any idea at all. But she did. So I have to do whatever I can. Right now, that means the three of us are collecting some normal clothes from Black Jack, so we can try and blend in as travellers. I don’t want us shouting who we are. We’re walking into a viper’s nest. If anyone so much as thinks we’re suspicious or has magic, then we’re dead.”

Emilia nodded slowly, “So who are we, then? Travellers are by their nature, suspicious.”

Rin shrugged, “That’s easy. Farm girls. Farms travel in families. Most of the men down south were killed whilst away fighting at Calis. I know a thing or two about farming. I stayed with a relative once, down there. A farm nestled in the hills, hard to find. We can stop by there first, it’s a half-day from the city, but they should be able to give us some information, at least.”

Emilia nodded slowly, “That may work, if I pretend to be your elderly mother.”

Shannon grinned, “That should work, mother dearest.”

Emilia turned up her nose, “Please, Priestess. Familiarity can wait.”

Rin stood up slowly, “I’m going to go pack a few things. If that’s okay.”

“Be in the hall by midday at the latest.” Shannon said.

It was only an hour until then, now. An hour before she stepped out of the comfort of a place she’d been living most of her life, and back into the cold embrace of the streets. She’d lived through the streets during a war before. It wasn’t something she was keen to go through again, and not with two other people depending on her to stay alive. She really hoped that Fasfeen hadn’t gone completely off the rails yet, but that was naivety. People were dying. They were being rounded up and executed whilst someone stood over the corpses and proclaimed how just their actions were.

Emilia sighed, “I too, should gather a few items. Food, and water.”

Shannon nodded, “If you can take care of our supplies, I have a few other tasks that need to be done before we leave.”

Mytris

It really was her. He couldn't understand it.

He looked at the woman covered head to toe in regal robes of an upper sister. She'd been here the whole time, a stone's throw away. He'd only come to the temple to try and talk to Antoinette. To try and calm down from everything that was happening around him. That girl was always his light in the dark, but this?

How long had Shannon known that she was alive?

The woman who called herself Margarite now pulled back her hood, letting it drop, and revealing her blonde hair. She smiled at him weakly, "Mytris. You're alive. It's actually you. Whenever the other sisters spoke of a boy in the temple, a meek boy with the eyes of a war god... I never thought it could be you. You were dead, and buried. Our home burned to the ground. Everyone else died. They pulled seventeen bodies from the ash. I thought you had to be one of them."

Mytris smiled, shaking his head, "I thought you died. I was up to my usual."

The woman rolled her eyes, "Thieving in the marketplace?"

"Yeah." He sighed, "I was running back, so happy. I'd managed to get a whole bushel of apples. Enough for all of us... And then I smelt the smoke. I felt the heat before I even got to the street. There was no way anyone survived that. How did you?"

She waved a hand around, "I'm not just here because it was the only option for a girl, Mytris. I could have been a whore. A slave. Even a thief. I'm good with my hands. Sarin saved me. Divine intervention. A cube of light lit up around me, protecting me from the blaze. I never saw Sarin. I don't know if she sent someone to do her work, or if she did it herself. All I know is she stepped in and saved my life. So I gave it to her. I gave up you."

Mytris was staggered. His sister wasn't just not dead, she was not dead by the hand of a goddess. Why? Why had a goddess who was sitting back and watching everyone die... Why had they saved his sister? From a house fire. There was nothing special about it. Nothing special about her. His family was unremarkable in every way. So why had Sarin decided that Salice shouldn't die, but be reborn?

Margarite directed him to a seat, and sat next to him, an arm going around him. For a moment he felt like was back home, complaining about how bright the night was, whilst his big sister sat by him, hearing him out. Letting him rant himself to sleep in her arms.

"There were two miracles that day." Margarite frowned, "What are the chances of you actually getting what you went out for?"

Mytris looked over at her in surprise. He hadn't thought about it like that. "Why? Why would Sarin save either of us?"

"I don't really care." Margarite shrugged, smiling at him, "What matters is that she did. I don't need to know the motives of the goddess. They could be good or bad or in-between. She serves a greater purpose, the purpose of our world. Keeping everything running, keeping us moving always towards the light, and away from the darkness. Yet, she decided we were worth saving. So I thank her for my new life. I always prayed for you, every night. Praying that Sarin would keep you safe, or guide you home to eternal bliss."

Mytris smiled slowly, "Sarin noticed. Maybe you are as annoying as ever."

Margarite laughed with him, and then sighed, "No, there's more to it than that. There's a

path beneath my feet, or there will be soon. I don't know what it is, not exactly. But I've been running into the High Priestess, and those she's handpicked, over and over. Too many times to be a coincidence. And now Sarin gives me my greatest wish. To be reunited with the brother I lost when half the city went up in flames. She's preparing me for something."

He hated that idea. The idea of his sister being caught in this war where no one would win.

Maybe that was the point. The sisters were still fighting to stop it, despite how inevitable war was. They kept the good fight, and he had a feeling they always would. The faith of some of these people, like his sister, was unparalleled. They weren't just believers. They gave Sarin the opportunities to do what needed to be done. They acted out. They weren't content to be herded like sheep. They embraced their goddess without doubt. Willing to pay the price.

He wasn't willing.

Antoinette

She looked from one low sister to the other in disbelief. “You stole her hairbrush... Because you were jealous she has blonde hair, whilst you have brown.”

The sister pouted, “So?”

Antoinette twitched, but turned to the other, “And you placed a ratspider in her bed... Why? Were you trying to kill her?”

The sister shook her head, but didn’t say anything.

Antoinette nearly face palmed. “You two are stupid, idiotic little children. Seriously. You both like each other. That’s why you’re doing these stupid things. You’re not jealous, you have a crush.”

They both immediately turned red and started protesting that it wasn’t true. She just rolled her eyes. She wondered if it was what she would have said if anyone had thought that Shannon was pranking her for her, and not for Mytris. Most of them probably still thought they were stuck in some sort of love triangle, with the boy being pulled between the two of them.

“So, your discipline.” Antoinette interrupted, and the two sisters fell silent. Which was blissful after having to sit here listening to them rant against each other, being completely oblivious to their actual feelings and motivations. “Until prayers complete next morning, neither of you is allowed to speak. You may communicate with sign, or by written word.”

Antoinette nodded to Eri, “Can you let the upper sisters know?”

Her helper nodded, “Already writing the memos, Sister.”

She breathed a sigh of relief as they left, and Eri swallowed nervously. Antoinette smiled at her, “You can laugh now, they won’t hear it.”

The pent-up humour boiled over and the two turned bright red, laughing until they were struggling to breathe. Eri gasped, “Was I really like that at their age? Geeze. Such a handful.”

Antoinette shook her head, “It remind you of anyone?”

Eri paused, “Yeah. So how was kissing the High Priestess?”

Antoinette felt the bottom drop out of her stomach, and she blushed furiously, “Say what?”

Eri giggled, “Sorry. Couldn’t help myself. She’s worried about you. That you haven’t had a chance to speak. She cares about you, a lot.”

Antoinette sighed, “I know. It’s just... I’m the Head of Discipline. She’s the High Priestess. Even if we can get the temple to lift the ban, it isn’t like they’d let us be together. I don’t want to be the reason everyone attacks her. She has enough of that crap already.”

Eri glared, “Exactly. She has enough of people giving her shit and asking her to eat it. She doesn’t need you to join in.”

Antoinette shrugged weakly, “I just don’t see how this can work, Eri. I wish it could. But I can wish on as many stars as I like, they won’t come in for me. Shannon is the important one. She’s the one everyone has to protect. I don’t matter, not really.”

Eri sighed, “You suck, as a girlfriend. Sorry, Sister, I know you’re my superior, and I’m supposed to respect you, but you just lost all of that. Shannon needs you, so get over yourself. You need to talk to her. At least say goodbye.”

“Goodbye?” Antoinette asked, panicking. Was Eri asking her to abandon her? Be all or nothing?

“Shit.” Eri winced, “She hasn’t told you yet.”

Antoinette leaned forward, glaring.

Eri looked at the ground.

She stood up and walked over to where her helper was suddenly very focused on writing notes to hand to the upper sisters. She glared at her, just waiting for the girl to break. All it took was confidence and authority, and this silent pose could make most people break.

“Nope.” Eri said slowly, “That’s her business, not mine.”

Antoinette blew a tuft of her hair in frustration, and sat back at her desk, pouting. What could goodbye mean? Was Shannon going to run away? She couldn’t blame her if she was. Not with the whole world leaning so heavily on a street orphan who hadn’t even learned to memorise most of the scriptures she was supposed to be living by. Shannon was not what anyone thought of when they thought of a hero come to save them. She was timid, and weak. She was petty and vindictive.

The door opened slowly, and she looked up in surprise.

Shannon looked different, dressed in the brown clothspun clothes of a field worker. She looked sideways at Eri and glared, “You. Get out.”

Eri shrugged, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Then she ran from the room.

Antoinette stood up, “What’s this, High Priestess?”

A bright light flooded the room, and Antoinette looked at the barrier in surprise, just before she was knocked off her feet, Shannon’s arms around her. The girl held her tight, crying into her chest. Just a complete flood of tears.

Antoinette held her gently, stroking her head, “Hey. Shh. It’s going to be okay, Shannon. Whatever is going on. It’ll be okay.”

“No.” Shannon growled, “It won’t. A temple in the south rebelled. People are dying. I have to go there and somehow make it better without getting dead. I have no idea what I am doing.”

Antoinette smiled weakly, “Trust in Sarin. She’s got us this far, hasn’t she?”

Shannon glared up at her, “Faith ain’t doing. Voiden shitfucking knuckle sandwiches. I’m walking into an actual rebellion. I don’t want sentiment.”

Antoinette winced, “Oh. You were reading our thoughts when you walked in, weren’t you?”

“More like memories.” Shannon snapped, “Memories of you being a total heartless bitch.”

That wasn’t entirely uncalled for. It still hurt though. Like getting punched in the gut. She had to make it up to her, somehow. “I could come with you.”

“I need you here.” Shannon pouted, “Yurk will be here soon. Katherine’s gone, Emilia will be with me. . . So of the people I trust to not make a total hash of things, it basically leaves you. So I’m leaving you in charge of the temple.”

“Fuuuuck.” Antoinette moaned.

Shannon laughed, and then kissed her cheek, “I wish I could take you.”

Antoinette looked into those grey eyes, staring into her, and she sighed, “I don’t want you to go. Really.”

Shannon leaned forward hesitantly.

Antoinette kissed her. Lightly at first, knowing they should get back to the topic at hand. Like the High Priestess walking into the middle of a civil war with only a sister to help her.

But lightly didn’t really satisfy either of them. Not with everything that had been happening.

She didn’t say anything, but she knew that Shannon understood. She wanted to hear her. To hear those magical words tangled in with the most embarrassing sounds that nature allowed them to create.

Shannon broke the kiss, standing up slowly, “Aren’t you going to undress me?”

Falien

He hated waking up being thrown to the ground.

Especially when it involved steel boots slamming into his chest and face. The metal crumpled against him, and he sat up slowly, stretching. It wasn't morning yet. This wasn't an angry ambush by the general in charge. This was vengeance from the other soldiers, embarrassed by him, or jealous.

He grinned over at the pile of naked bodies as it began to move, as they began to feel embarrassment and shame. They were always so cute when they began to realise what they had done. When they began to feel regret at being his playthings. Asking to be his plaything.

Strong hands grabbed him dragging him out of the tent and into the forest beside the encampment.

Falien looked up as he saw a fire burning, and a blacksmith standing beside it. This was something else. This was actually something of concern for him. He wasn't immortal or eternal. He was still a mortal man, he was just complicated. Those complications had limitations.

He began to pull away as tongs picked up the red hot container from over the fire. The soldiers had melted down daggers, from the nearby discarded hilts. Molten steel. This was going to burn and make him scream. He couldn't imagine it any other way.

Someone grabbed his head by his hair, yanking it backwards.

They weren't going to pour it over him. They were going to pour it down his throat.

Falien's jaw clenched shut.

He felt a knife shove between his teeth, twisting to create a small gap. The blacksmith began to pour.

Falien's eyes shot open, and his mouth opened to scream despite himself.

The air filled with steam as the burning metal struck his tongue, and the walls of his throat.

Verity

She didn't do anything. She just stood there in the snow as she saw the others dragging away the unconscious prince. The dying prince. She stood there and watched. She knew it was wrong. This was murder. Attempted murder of a royal family member. Yet... It was for the best. No one could control themselves around him. They were an army, marching into the jaws of hell.

They might all die. They couldn't afford to let Falien control them. To make them forget themselves.

She turned away, making her choice.

She would betray her prince, to protect her nation. That was how she would justify it to herself. When the general asked questions, she would give no answers. It would be better for everyone if Falien was simply forgotten.

A piercing headache hit her, knocking Verity off her feet.

She clutched her skull, wincing as the images swam in front of her.

"He's alive." She heard, looking up to see a farmer standing over a blue body in the snow. "Hypothermia hasn't set in. He can live. Put him in the caravan."

Verity winced as she saw the farmer lifting the body of Falien. Saving his life from the frosted cold. Maybe it was for the best. She knew he was supposed to be at Ozandia in the end. That if he wasn't, then none of them had a chance to survive. None of them could survive the coming war, and whatever else was on the way. Victory depended on Falien, and it seemed that the fates weren't done with the boy, not just yet.

Falien sat at the bar, and smiled sweetly at the woman behind the bar. She turned and poured an ale, "What brings you here, stranger? Passing through?"

Verity glared at the scene, wanting to shout a warning to the bartender. Not to look at his face. Not to fall for his tricks. He didn't have to do anything. He made you feel so different, so happy. With nothing but a smile.

Falien turned, "I missed out on the beds here, didn't I. By a few hundred refugees."

The waitress put a hand on his wrist, "Oh, I wouldn't say that. You could share mine."

Verity looked away, ashamed.

He'd done the same thing to her. Made her into his toy without even trying. Made her compromise her own values, as if they were nothing at all.

A hand touched her shoulder, and the pain came throbbing back into her skull.

Verity winced, looking up at Ruth. "You okay, holy one?"

She smiled stiffly, standing up, "Just a headache."

"Hangover, you mean." Ruth said accusingly.

Verity spat on the ground, "I hate that bastard. I don't know how he got inside my skull, but he ain't staying there."

Ruth rolled her eyes, "Don't be so hard on yourself, soldier. We all have our moments of weakness."

"I don't." Verity said stiffly, and then sighed, "It wasn't like that, Ruth. Really. This isn't the first time Prince Falien has done crap like this. He's made visiting queen's abandon their husbands.

He... He isn't human. Not fully."

Ruth winced, "Ouch. Wait... Was this...?"

Verity blushed, looking away. "Yes. I should have had my guard up."

Ruth turned her head back, "Seriously. Was this your first time?"

Verity sighed, "Yes. I told you. I don't do that."

Ruth's jaw dropped, "What in the... Half this army would be willing to sleep with you at the drop of a hat. How have you never found the time?"

"It isn't about the time." Verity glared, uncertain how to explain herself to her friend. Ruth was more than willing to bed a new recruit or two. She saw it as nothing but a fun time. A fun moment to help forget the sweat and blood of her daily life.

For Verity, it was something else entirely. She'd risked losing her gift. From the headache, and the vision, it didn't look like she had. Not yet. She still might. Sex and pregnancy both risked her losing the gift of prophecy, as they had for every prophet since the dawn of time. She was supposed to be set aside from human desire, as a channel for the gods.

"I swore a vow." Verity sighed, "A long time ago."

Ruth frowned, "Oh. I'm sorry. Can I ask?"

"To Wrodin." Verity smiled slowly, "Not a guy."

Ruth blinked, "Huh. Never took you for the religious type. Sorry. Want to talk about something else?"

Verity shrugged, and began walking towards the fire, motioning to her friend. "It isn't quite like that. Not really. The vow was to Wrodin, but I don't owe him any loyalty. I'm not a worshipper in any of the temple cults. It's more complicated than that."

"Magic?" Ruth guessed idly, and Verity paused, turning to her, "I guess you of all people deserve to know. How long have we fought beside each other, Ruth? Ten years? Thirteen?"

"Twelve." Ruth stated, obviously knowing that Verity knew it just as well. "So, what's the secret of the holy one?"

Verity pulled her between two tents. It wasn't much privacy, but it was the most that a soldier could expect. "The king does come and see me, same with our general."

Ruth nodded, "Duh. I'm not so stupid I'm missing that. And it isn't just because you're a centurion."

"I'm a centurion because of my vow to the gods." Verity sighed heavily, "Ruth... I'm... A prophet."

Ruth raised an eyebrow, "If you don't want to tell me then you don't have to be rude."

"You die, Ruth." Verity growled, "You die by the hand of an ork. The sky overhead is on fire."

Ruth's face went white, and she swallowed, "Then the world was ending. I die at the end? You saw me... Dying whilst the world did? I actually get to survive long enough to watch the gods kill us all?"

Verity sighed, "Yes. And there are orks coming. We'll fight them, long before we fight Ozandius."

Ruth stared at her in shock, "Oh shit. You weren't kidding."

Verity nodded tiredly, “Yeah. So when little prince bastard had his way, he risked me losing that gift.”

“Sounds more like a curse.” Ruth replied, smiling. “So that’s why you’re always so lucky. You already know what’s going to happen.”

Verity laughed, “It isn’t that easy. There’s always more than one possibility. I just get to guess a bit earlier than others. You’ll still be able to beat me at dice.”

Ruth shook her head, “So. You’ve been dealing with this, all on your own?”

“I am on my own.” Verity replied, “I’ve never met anyone else like me. I’m not sure they exist.”

Ruth shrugged, “And? Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have anyone to complain to.”

“I have no complaints.” Verity stated, “I don’t. I am a soldier. I am willing to be of service. I’ve never known another life, Ruth. I was raised by someone who abused my gift. The king doesn’t. He looks out for me. That’s more than I ever expected to get.”

Ruth rolled her eyes, “You’re missing out. Even if you didn’t know it until today. There have been guys who make me feel exactly what the prince made you feel. The curse is that the prince can do that to anyone. All the same, one or two men might be able to make you feel that way.”

Verity snorted, “Really. Have you ever seen me impressed by a potential suitor?”

“No.” Ruth replied, grinning, “That doesn’t remove the possibility. You’ve only been around army brats. Of course they’re shockingly bad. They’re looking for a quick lay in-between kills. They’re using you just as much as you use them. But... If you want this feeling... You’re looking for something more long term. Something that takes time to kindle. It’s something that sneaks up on you, before you realise it.”

Verity laughed, “Yeah. That’s never going to happen.”

Ruth shrugged, stepping back onto the road, “Sure. Come on, holy one, fires are going. We’ve got another morning of training the idiots.”

She’d accepted it surprisingly well. As if it didn’t matter to Ruth if she was magic.

Verity was almost surprised enough to forget her guilt at letting the soldiers drag Falien out into the snow. To hurt him. To nearly kill him.

Shannon

She was beyond embarrassed. It had been meant to be one perfect moment, one bloody storybook moment before she had to take off and try and figure out how to end a war. Unfortunately, that was apparently too much to ask.

Neither of them had any idea what they were doing. Which meant lots of confusion, laughter and just a tad bit of pain. In the end, they'd stopped, both incredibly disappointed with themselves. She should have stuck to her original plan of making out with her.

Shannon sighed, waiting by the doorway.

"Now, that's a glum look if I ever saw one."

She turned, smiling softly, "Good day, ma'am."

The redhead standing there grinned at her, "Good to meet you. Can you tell me how to find your High Priestess, Sister?"

Something behind the woman moved and Shannon blinked. She had wings. Purple wings.

She curtsied, "Lady Summer. My apologies. I am the High Priestess, Shannon."

Summer smiled, elbowing a man beside her, "See, I told you that'd be her."

"Fine." He replied, "You win."

Shannon felt a strange existential sort of terror pass over her as she looked at the man, and into the endless black sea that was his eyes. She almost felt like she was falling into the Void itself.

Summer laughed, "Oh wow. She's a dark one, Trei. Watch out."

She blushed, "You have the gift of affinity, too?"

Summer looked at her carefully, "Affinity. Oh. Thoughts. Not really. Just a hint. Most Fae have the ability to some level or another. I was looking at your aura."

Shannon shook her head, "Sorry, I don't get it."

Trei ran a hand through his hair, "She's human, Summer. Magic isn't something she's had a lot of experience with, even if she does serve a goddess."

Shannon curtsied again, "We should move on. I'm afraid I have a bit of a timetable, in fact I was hoping for your assistance with it. Shall we adjourn to a meeting room?"

Summer shrugged, "I heard something was happening in the south. Trei and I don't have a lot to say. Mostly just checking in. How about some lunch or something?"

Shannon bit her lip nervously and Trei sighed, "Summer. Did you notice the marketplace? They're in the middle of a food crisis."

The Fae blinked, "Oh right. No magic, my bad. How about we throw a feast, in thanks for having us?"

Shannon pulled the two aside and erected a barrier. "Sorry, I know you're being kind, but you'll need to tone it down. Do you notice the way everyone is looking at us, right now? They know who I am, and that I'm using the power of the goddess, and yet..."

Summer looked around, and her face fell slowly. "They hate magic. Just like Vastras."

Trei shrugged, "Can you blame them, Summer? We blew up a city. Magic is a weapon of war to most of these people, and that's all it has ever been. Even if you summoned food, they'd rather

starve than eat it, and I do mean that. They would let themselves die rather than accept help.”

Shannon sighed, “It is one of things I’d like to see improve. But it probably won’t happen in my lifetime.”

Summer nodded, “I understand. I’m sorry. I’m a bit out of my depth here. Trei is the only human I’ve spent any decent amount of time with... And well... He was dead by the time we met.”

She did not understand that at all. But she appreciated the sentiment.

“Ozandius is in a tough spot.” Shannon said, dismissing the barrier, “Most of our supplies went towards the army that we lost at Calis. There are rebellious movements gaining ground. Hatred is on the rise. Hatred against your kind, hatred against the kingdom. Anything goes. And then we have Yurk on our doorstep, and Kru watching.”

Summer nodded, “Kru and I have signed a non-aggression pact. That’s part of why I’m here. Neither of us will attack each other. It’s tense, but a tense peace. It won’t last, but for now it is worth it.”

Shannon sighed, “So we’re on our own.”

“No.” Summer shook her head, “I’m here to offer my help. Astrian already did, and the king told her he’d like to rape her. So I thought I might go through you this time. If he threatened me like that, Trei might create a new hell realm for him. Or worse. I’m offering to set up a negotiation between Kru and Ozandius. Your country doesn’t have anything she wants, so if you agree not to attack her, then she might take care of Yurk for you. Not the best solution, but it’d be a starting point.”

Shannon ground her teeth, “Piece of shit. That king... One day.”

Summer shrugged, “We’ve all had worse done to us. Astrian is the only Fae that lives permanently in this realm. She’s the one who is restoring Calis. Can you imagine some of what gets tossed her way?”

Shannon shook her head, “There’s no excuse. It shouldn’t be acceptable, least of all for a king.”

Trei smiled, “I think that you and I will get along well, High Priestess.”

She winced, and held her dress nervously, “I’m sorry. I know this is formal, but that title is starting to drag. Can you call me Sister Shannon instead?”

Summer grinned, and surprised her with a hug, “You’re a cute kid. Sarin was a bit cruel putting you in this position.”

The lost goddess leaned back, “Sure, Sister Shannon.”

Trei sighed, “So, this temple you want to go to. Things won’t go well if you go. Worse if you stay, but you need to be prepared for that.”

Shannon felt a chill run down her back, “Prophecy?”

“I can see through time.” Trei shrugged, “My eyes are those of a Fate. Like Sarin, or Yio. I’m close to them, but not quite. I can see the various timelines, and where and when they converge. Ozandius is the centre of something. I’m not quite clear on what or who, yet. The actions of the gods, and people like me, can change the possibilities. Make things less clear.”

Shannon frowned, “You are a god though, right?”

“A new god.” Trei shrugged, “I don’t like the term. I’m me, and that’s enough. However, Kru is also a new god. And now, a new one is somewhere near Ozandius. In it, or close to it or

something. Hard to tell. We screw with the natural order of things just by existing.”

Shannon winced, “And I still need to leave. Oh yay.”

Summer turned, looking at the crowd, “It seems your companions are ready to leave. Are you ready?”

“Not yet.” Shannon sighed, “Lady Summer, I accept your offer of intercession. I will convince the king when I get back.”

Summer shrugged her wings, “I’ll see what I can do. At least get Kru to hold back. Who are you placing in charge to stop the Yurk whilst you’re gone?”

Shannon waved a hand to a woman who was on the other side of the room and seemed to be going to great lengths not to look in their direction. “Sister Antoinette. She’s our current Head of Discipline.”

Trei smiled, “She’s cute. You did well.”

Shannon turned bright red and was about to protest when Summer grinned, “Don’t worry, Sister. Trei wasn’t talking then. Straight into your head.”

She frowned, and sighed. She bet her aura was showing her crestfallen she was.

Summer put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed, “You know, my first time, I ended up crying for about three days. I thought it was going to be perfect too. It took us both time to learn each other’s body. Time to get used to each other.”

Shannon turned slowly, looking at the way Summer was smiling. The way she was standing. The way she was glowing. Her jaw dropped, “Holy. I didn’t think Fae could get pregnant.”

Summer’s cheeks went as red as her hair, and Trei laughed, “Oh wow. No one knows yet, Sister Shannon.”

The Faen queen touched her stomach gently, and Shannon flinched as she saw a foot slap the hand away with incredible force. “She’s an active one. Like Trei has said, his kind changes things just by being around. They rewrite the rules of reality without even noticing it. If you were looking at the fabric of reality from the outside, you could track their movements. They change the warp and weft. So... Trei gave us this. The first Faen baby that will ever be born.”

Shannon couldn’t help but glow along with the woman.

Summer sighed, looking up, “So, where shall we make this portal?”

Shannon nodded, “Please, follow me. I’ve had the courtyard emptied.”

Mytris

The guards were acting strange. Arming themselves. There were two nearby, strapping on battle armour. This wasn't what they used to defend themselves against drunks and boring radicals. This was designed to protect in the heat of a real fight.

He hadn't seen the guards gear up like this since the army had been sent off to Calis.

The king was expecting an attack.

He moved closer, to within earshot, but apparently still working away as diligently as ever. Keeping the palace immaculate. Not at all eavesdropping. It wasn't that unusual anyway. Most of the time the guards would let one or two of the servants in on the secret just to stop the spying. It was easier to control the flow of information that way, and it kept everyone calmer.

"Did you see the guy?" One of them asked, slapping a brace on.

The other shrugged, "Nah. Too busy checking out the girl. She had freaking wings man. Why would I look at the guy?"

"His eyes." The guard choked, "Holy shit balls. Those eyes. I don't even know how to describe. They weren't just... Black. That's a lifeless way to describe it. I felt like I fell into the Void itself. Like I was being dragged into the deepest pits of hell. Like my soul itself was getting torn apart."

"What?" The other asked, "Dude. You're superstitious. What is this?"

The guard shivered, "Like I said. Those eyes were fucked."

"Sounds it." The other sighed, "The girl was pretty. Do you think those stories about the Fae are true? She looked pretty lightweight to me. Slender. Delicate. The kind of girl everyone wants at the whorehouse. I bet I could make her scream."

The guard laughed, "Don't let that freak hear you. Hell, probably don't let the girl hear. Fae are meant to eat babies or some shit, right?"

The other scratched his head, "Yeah. Not sure how that's supposed to work... Aren't they vegetarians or some crap? Is like, baby an exception? Or do we only remember the complete psychos?"

The guard paused, "Huh. You know, I did hear that they only eats leaves. Weird. I guess we don't know how many of the old stories are actually true. Like, do you think some of the other races exist?"

"Freaking orks, man." He said, shivering, "Something that nightmare-ish has to be real."

Mytris had heard enough.

The guards hadn't talked about why they were arming up, but he knew. If a Fae was in the city, they were here to see either the king, or the new High Priestess. Shannon. This was about Shannon. The king was feeling threatened by her. Feeling like the political balance was shifting in her favour. There was only one answer to that, and it was intimidation or destruction.

The guards were getting ready to annihilate the temple.

They were laughing and joking because they saw no threat. Nor should they. The sisters weren't warriors. There was no secret sect within that devoted themselves to the way of the sword. All of them would die. This was a slaughter. They might fight back, but they were up against people who fought to eat, every day.

A desperate fighter is hard, and unpredictable. A rat backed into a corner. You get hurt when you try and take them, no matter how strong you are... But you still take them. They can't effect the outcome. Guards would be injured. Some might even die.

But in the end, the floor the temple would run red with the blood of the sisters.

Mytris turned and left, ignoring how openly he was moving. It didn't matter anymore. He had his sister back for the first time. He had to protect Antoinette and Shannon. He was abandoning his life, forfeiting his life. He would stand in their defence. It would kill him. There wasn't another way out of this.

He would die, and some might live. He would buy them time to escape.

It was the best he could do.

Antoinette

She couldn't look at Shannon, so she focused on speaking to the other sisters, taking notes and trying to get a grasp of who the recurring problems in the temple were, and who might be about to make a political move against her. She didn't have Shannon's miracles to protect her if one of the elders decided to try and become the new priestess.

She really couldn't look at Shannon. Every time she caught a glimpse across the hall she was filled with embarrassment and shame. The girl had offered her everything to her, and all she'd managed to do in her clumsiness is hurt both of them. It was all her own fault. She'd hurt Shannon, rather than giving her a sendoff to remember. She'd wanted to give something to Shannon to call her home.

Instead she might have given her an excuse not to come back.

She had no idea how to make it better. She wanted to make it better. But all the same, maybe Shannon really would be better off without her. It'd certainly make her life less interesting. Less excuses to give the people who might hate her. Less reasons to suddenly remove her from power. Sarin might step in every now and then, but Sarin had obviously appointed her in the first place because she didn't have enough time or effort to deal with the temple in the first place.

Margarite waved a hand in front of her face, "Sister?"

Antoinette blinked and shook her head, "Sorry. Too much on my mind. What were we saying?"

Margarite sighed, "With the influence of Sister Emilia gone, then the next big threat is Sister Elba. She has been meeting with the other sisters at night, trying to gather support to reappoint Sister Katherine. Her demotion doesn't matter, not when the High Priestess was a low sister herself."

Antoinette wondered briefly if she could just evict all the elder sisters. It'd fracture the temple, but so what? The temple currently was nothing but a festering and bloated boil. She should probably leave the shake-ups to the High Priestess, rather than trying to seize power.

"What will Yurk's advance mean for the sisters?" Antoinette asked cautiously, and Margarite blinked, "Yurk? The northern kingdom?"

She suddenly became aware of just how many low sisters were around them. "Let's adjourn to my office. Sister Eri, can you stand watch?"

Eri smiled at her and nodded.

She carefully eased through the room, trying not to notice that Shannon had left the room. Probably already on her way to the south, to try and deal with the rebellion. And she hadn't even said a proper goodbye. That was Antoinette's fault. It still hurt.

She sat behind her desk and sighed heavily, "Yurk is about to launch a full scale invasion. The army won't be able to hold them, not for long. So the king will come to us, and ask us to negotiate on his behalf. Partly so we're responsible for all the inevitable crap that will follow, so we can be blamed. Partly because the Yurks don't trust him to actually speak the truth when he needs to. If we fail, Ozandius will be conquered."

Margarite flinched, "If things are this bad... It is absolutely idiotic we have infighting. Do the elder sisters know?"

"Of course they do." Antoinette replied, "That's exactly why they're making their move. This, for some of them, is an opportunity to seize power. To take it at the excuse of needing it to help us... And then never giving it back."

Margarite shook her head, “Elders... Elder sisters acting out of self-interest, instead of on behalf of the goddess. When did this start?”

“Before either of us joined the temple.” Antoinette shrugged, “There’s a reason we’re a huge disappointment to Sarin.”

Margarite sighed heavily, “And now I join them. Speaking to Mytris... I wanted to leave. I really did. To become his big sister again. To try and protect him. It made me forget about the family I have here. I shouldn’t have.”

“Shannon wouldn’t have asked you without good reason to.” Antoinette replied, “Her friendship with Mytris is not strong enough she would compromise herself in front of the goddess. If Sarin has time for anyone, she has time for Shannon.”

Margarite frowned, “Her love for Mytris might be another thing.”

Antoinette blushed and nervously laughed, “Shannon does not have a crush on Mytris.”

Margarite looked at her in surprise, “Are you speaking from knowledge? Or are you hoping?”

“I don’t want your brother.” Antoinette said quickly, “I do know that Shannon has an eye for someone else. She’s even shared a kiss. So it isn’t just a little rumour, but it’d be best if it does not become one.”

Margarite nodded slowly, “I find that... Surprising. Especially that you haven’t made another move on Mytris. He would have you, if you asked. Though I guess it does break many temple rules.”

“Screw the rules.” Antoinette sighed, “Where have they got us? Corrupt elders. Beaten sisters. The shame of our goddess. But, like I said, I don’t want your brother. I did, for a while, sure. But then I kissed him, and I knew I didn’t. I think he’s starting to come to terms with that. It has been half a year.”

“He’s not.” Margarite laughed, “He thinks he can convince you to come around if he plays the gentleman.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, “So, playing at the least attractive role. He’s a thick one, isn’t he?”

Margarite blinked, “I like a gentleman. You don’t?”

“No.” Antoinette blushed, “I like... Bad boys. People willing to do whatever it takes.”

The upper sister nodded slowly, “That explains a lot. Well... Do you have any bad boys who could help us defeat Yurk?”

“We do have an option.” Antoinette swallowed nervously, “It does involve breaking almost every rule the temple has. And it wouldn’t be too far to call it a self-sacrifice play. We could offer Yurk legitimacy.”

Margarite frowned, “Continue.”

“Call Eri in.” Antoinette replied, waiting for both sisters to be seated, “Yurk, as we know it, is a new dynasty. The current king’s father seized power by killing every member of the previous royal family. As such, there are some strong political divides, and his power isn’t that stable. Part of marching to war, is trying to prove to his people he is the best option for the throne. One of his advisers, Vizier Tane, is fairly well known for funding minor rebellions. Tane’s power is predicated on if the king seized the throne, then anyone could be king if they did the same.”

Eri nodded, “So, Yurk needs a way to bind the two dynasties, making it legitimate in the eyes of the people. Wouldn’t that usually be a marriage? But he killed them all.”

“Everyone he could find.” Antoinette sighed, “A certain third princess of that family escaped alive. If she was offered, then Yurk might accept it as an opening negotiation. They’d require other things. Probably a yearly tax of some sort, and an acknowledgement Ozandius belongs to Yurk, but they would continue to let Ozandius govern itself. Our king would become a governor, but nothing would really change.”

Margarite nodded slowly, “That makes sense. I’ve certainly heard of things going similarly... But where are we going to find this third princess?”

“The Third Princess, Ariadne, is a member of this temple.” Antoinette spoke meekly, her words faltering. She didn’t want to say it. She really hoped they would guess it. It was hard enough to admit it to Shannon, someone who would never use any of her words against her. But she wasn’t sure how much she could trust these two. They could take the knowledge to the king, and he could kidnap her, and change the negotiations in favour of himself, and still leave open the option to destroy the temple.

Eri raised an eyebrow, “Should I call you, ‘your majesty’, now?”

Margarite blinked, “Wait. You’re the Third Princess?”

Antoinette smiled weakly, “I was sent here to avoid dying. That bit worked. But I was hoping never to return home. It wasn’t a home. Here is.”

“The self-sacrifice play.” Margarite shook her head, “It would be for you. Giving up the temple. Every friend, every ally. And whoever has replaced Mytris as the crush in your life.”

Eri blushed, looking away silently.

Antoinette resisted the temptation to glare at her, and just hoped that Margarite wouldn’t notice. “You’re my inquisitors. I’m hoping that we can find something better. A way to make Yurk leave without trying to force Ozandius to become a part of their rule. For that, we need information. We need to know everything that is happening in Ozandius.”

Eri nodded, “I have some help on that front. My brother has accepted the High Priestess’ offer. I will be his voice as her adviser.”

Antoinette breathed a sigh of relief, “Good. Then maybe we can get through this without the whole city erupting into flames whilst Shannon is gone. Is there anything vital I need to know? Demands? Immediate needs?”

Eri shrugged, “The rebels are like everyone else. Running low on food and clean water. Dirty water makes for sick people.”

Antoinette nodded, “I’ll see what we can spare, if you can arrange distribution. To prove we mean to take the relationship seriously.”

Margarite frowned, “Won’t the king take that badly?”

“Not if it comes with a promise not to attack.” Antoinette sighed, “Hopefully, it does. I’m supposed to meet with the King today, to update him on our efforts to slow the insurrection throughout the city. I will be telling him the attacks are going to stop, at least by one group. Whether or not it turns out to be true.”

“He won’t.” Eri nodded, “He’ll listen. This is the first time anyone has been willing to talk, he won’t throw that out the window. It’s a foothold towards legitimacy.”

Antoinette smiled weakly, “I wish that sounded better. Margarite, you now have an excuse to visit the palace. I want you to watch who is coming and going. If we know who the king’s friends

are, maybe we can convince him not to try and take Yurk out with another failed full frontal assault. We wouldn't survive it."

The upper sister frowned, "That feels a bit disingenuous. Mytris isn't a tool."

"Yes." Antoinette nodded, "That's why you'll be watching, and not asking. But the palace involves lots of waiting around in the one room."

Margarite frowned, "It still endangers my brother."

"I know." Antoinette shrugged, "We do what we have to. I know I'm asking a lot, and I'll listen if you have an alternative, but for now, I need you to do it."

She'd hoped she wouldn't have to order a sister like this. To force them to endanger the people they care about. The world wasn't fair, it wasn't kind. If you didn't do what you had to do, then you'd die. The entire kingdom was on a knife-edge. One wrong move by any of the players and everyone would end up dead by the end. She was barely one of the players at all, which meant she had to convince the other players of what the right move would be.

It was manipulative, and unkind. But that was the game that had been given to her, and she would win it.

No matter the cost.

Falien

Something prodded him.

He just wanted it to go away. To leave him to die like everyone else had.

“He’s alive.” A voice spoke, and he felt rough hands feeling across his face and throat, “Hypothermia hasn’t set in. He can live. Put him in the caravan.”

Falien didn’t open his eyes, letting them carry him. Letting them toss him to a hard floor. He didn’t care. He wished he had died. He’d rarely felt pain at all in his life. Never had he felt pain like that. His throat burned until he wasn’t sure he had one. His stomach had swelled and ruptured. And then, and then he hadn’t been able to breathe at all. The metal had set in his throat.

It had taken him a full day to grab and rip the damn thing out.

He still held it, a perfect replica of the inside of his throat. A bloodied pile of steel, a reminder of what those idiots had done to him. He was a prince. They were just his soldiers. Weak, pathetic creatures. He would make them pay for what they had done to him.

Like these idiots.

What right did they have to try and save his life?

He should kill them. Every single one of them. They dared to touch him. He was worth more than any of them. He had no need of their help. He had no desire for it.

Falien’s eyes opened slowly as he felt the carriage beginning to move.

A woman leaned over him, “Ssh. You’re okay. We found you. Can you speak?”

He touched his tender throat, and shook his head. He was healing, and he doubted that anyone other than him would have possibly been able to survive something like this. It might take him some time.

The woman frowned, “Do you want some water?”

Falien shook his head, sitting up. He doubted that drinking would do anything but irritate the badly damaged flesh. Breathing already hurt.

He shifted up onto a seat, and looked at the woman more carefully. She wore simple clothes. Cheap cloth of a peasant. So they really were just refugees. Well, maybe not yet. The war may not have crossed completely into this region if they were willing to stop and inspect a body that might have been dead by the side of the road. Or maybe they were all just idiots.

It might be best for them if he killed them now. Spared them the coming horrors.

However, she had a nice smile. It would be a pity to kill someone that cute, at least not before he experienced the pleasure of making that mouth show other expressions.

Verity

She trudged through the snow, keeping an eye to the youngest in her columns. Many of them had never seen this much snow in their lives. They probably never would again, if she was right about it coming from an unnatural source. Marching through waist deep snow was a skill. It was something you had to learn by doing. The more experienced soldiers learned faster. If they didn't learn to adapt, they'd be dead.

She glanced to the forest widening in front of them. It was spreading out, moving towards a clearing. They were marching straight toward it. It made sense, and would make for a decent enough campground. Yet, she couldn't remember any scouting reports of a clearing like this.

She pushed forward, pulling up beside the general's cart, being dragged across the top of the snow, "Sir. Did you know about this?"

The general blinked, looking down at her, "What, centurion?"

"The clearing."

He turned back, as if he were fighting to see it. "I... I don't. Shit. Halt!"

The order rippled through the ranks and the sound of metal striking metal faded as the soldiers all paused, and the general rubbed his head. "It's like the clearing... Is trying to remove itself from my head."

"Glamour." She whispered slowly, and spun, eyes wide and grabbed the spear out of the air. "Ambush!"

The ground around them erupted. Small green and angry creatures skittering up from the surface. Arrows and spears flying in every direction. She heard people dying, people screaming. Heard the wailing of goblins as the soldiers fought back.

Verity mounted the general's cart, cutting arrows out of the air with her sword, grabbing spears with the other and tossing them back towards the ones that had thrown them. They were in a choke-point. It wasn't quite as bad as the killing field that had been set up for them ahead, but they wouldn't survive in here, not on the defensive. The general snapped, "Retreat!"

She heard the column attempting to move, but moving an army was difficult at the best of times. In this kind of narrow and confined space, they didn't have much of a chance.

Verity tossed her spear into a goblin with a thunk and scream, before she ducked down into the cart. She needed to give them all an edge. The snow and overcast sky were the edge of the goblins. They couldn't fight openly and happily in these conditions. They could run across the top of the snow whilst the soldiers were trapped inside it.

She closed her eyes, clenching her fists.

She might only be a prophet, but she knew enough magic to reach out to the mages in the ranks. She could hear them shouting to each other. Feel them tossing fireballs across the snow into clusters of the enemy, but the mages were too spread out to have much of an effect, the enemy was too agile to be struck down by the slow moving magic.

She linked herself into their thoughts, commanding attention. "I'm with the general. We have an idea. It requires all of you."

Complaints and screams for her to unlink came back through.

"Light." Verity demanded, "We need to open the clouds, and create the brightest light we can.

It won't stop the goblins, but it will weaken them, and it will terrify them."

It took a while to reach consensus. Mages were individual by nature. Cooperation wasn't something they were very good at. It wasn't something they were inclined to agree to, but being overwhelmed by mutant frogs who would rape your corpse had a way of changing the stakes.

Verity planned the holes in the cloud cover for the air mages to target. Flaming tornadoes pierced the sky as the clouds were blown aside. Rocks rained out from the attacks. Nothing serious. This wasn't an attack, it was an intimidation.

Verity coughed weakly, feeling the blood on her chin as the columns began to move again, taking advantage of the goblins scurrying for cover. They'd be back, but the army would be ready by then. She'd taken a risk. Using magic had costs. Generally she used Faen artefacts to pay it, but this time she hadn't had the time. The only thing she had to pay the cost with was her own life. She was lucky it had only injured her, and not outright killed her.

The general put a hand on her shoulder, "Thank you, centurion."

Verity smiled weakly, dragging herself upright, and looking as the army reformed into battle lines, surrounding the general in a protective half circle. The goblins were already beginning to sprint across the snow, but this time waves of arrows were crashing down on them, and they were running towards readied shields. The element of surprise had been lost.

The general pushed her into a sitting position, "I need you alive. After this battle. Don't do anything rash."

He was right. She would have to watch. This was one battle that wasn't hers.

Shannon

It was cold. Too cold for this time of year. There shouldn't be snow on the branches, even this far south. Yet, there it was. The entire hillside was covered two feet deep in the stuff. It wasn't fluffy, it was just ice that couldn't be bothered to be either hard or soft. It was freezing, and it was wet and she couldn't stop dreaming about her brand new soft bed, and the softer and warmer person who had shared it.

She hadn't said goodbye before she went. Partly because she was too afraid to approach Antoinette whilst she seemed so angry. Partly because she blamed herself for being so clumsy. Partly because she knew she couldn't hide her feelings in front of the others. Not whilst she was feeling like this. Feeling so guilty, and so confused. Did Antoinette really hate her now? She'd tried to do everything right.

She gave herself to her. Not because she had to, but because she wanted to. She wanted to be Antoinette's, and nobody else's. She wanted to give her that, if nothing else. There wasn't a lot she could give. Her life wasn't her own. She was the chosen vessel of the goddess. The chosen arbiter in the coming stinking and bloody war.

Shannon's eyes widened and she gasped, "Stop!"

The two sisters with her froze, looking over at her, and Shannon swallowed nervously, closing her hands into fists, ready to cast a barrier. "I can smell blood."

They didn't get a chance to react to what she said. The snow erupted as giant grey and brown beasts burst out of it. Twice as tall as any man. Wrists as thick as most trees. Claws as long as knives, and tusks to match. The creatures roared, charging.

They were the source of the smell. She could see the dried and flaking material stuck to them.

Three barriers sprang into existence.

Shannon tried to appear strong as a beast slammed into the barrier. Nothing happened, and nothing would. There was no power to break a barrier like this. All the same, with it leaning over her, grasping the golden cube and screaming noiselessly, she could barely keep the tears at bay. She could see every scrap of flesh hanging from it. This thing hadn't just killed, it had killed humans. She knew those organs sticking out of its teeth. She'd seen them falling from gutted men on the streets often enough.

There was a brief flash, and the creature stumbled back, holding a decapitated wrist in confusion.

Another flash and it fell backwards into the snow. Redness spread around the fallen creature.

Shannon looked at the figure standing in front of her. Someone hooded, wearing white. They held a sword in one hand. It was clear they were a powerful warrior. Two strikes to kill something like this. That wasn't just a soldier. That was the level of skill she'd expect from a paladin.

The other creatures fell just as quickly, the figure appearing and disappearing over the snow, without disturbing it.

Shannon released her barrier, but kept the other two intact.

The mysterious warrior who had saved them turned, pulling back the hood slowly. It revealed a feminine face, but with strange ribbed ears, long and straight pink hair, and two black eyes that seemed to consume everything around them.

Shannon swallowed nervously, "You're a Fate."

“Not anymore.” The woman replied shrugging, “I’m mortal.”

Shannon blinked in surprise, “Lady Yio.”

The woman cleaned her sword in the snow, and then sheathed it. “Yes. And who are you? A Saint of Sarin? The Miracle of Protection, that’s her barrier.”

“Something like that.” Shannon said guardedly.

Yio rolled her eyes, “Sure. Whatever. Look, this place is overrunning with orks. I have a snow cave nearby. We’ll be safer there.”

Shannon dismissed the barriers around the other two, “Fine, Lady Yio. Lead on.”

The others hadn’t heard everything, but that should be enough to keep them in line, at least for a short while.

The woman pulled her hood back up, shielding it from the wind, and began to trek through the snow, slowly. It was obvious she was moving at this pace so that they could keep track of her. The snow was beginning to fall again, limiting vision. The wind was beginning to howl. Shannon was regretting her decision to go with farm clothes. This stuff was designed to keep a worker at a light temperature in the midst of back-breaking work. It was designed to be stuck in the middle of a blizzard.

She followed Yio down some steps carved in ice, and into a small cave, barely big enough for the four of them.

The woman flicked a wrist, lighting a fire in the centre of the room. A fire burning from nothing.

Shannon shuffled against the wall, warming her hands, “I thought you were in Eldrasa.”

Yio shrugged, “I left, after I saw what Kru was becoming. I came here to stop her attacks. I’ve made some headway at containing them, but not much. Now, Sister of Sarin, why are you here? And why aren’t you wearing your robes?”

Shannon sighed, “A mission of Sarin. The king thinks a village half a day south of here rebelled.”

“We did.” Yio replied, “I led the rebellion. It wasn’t against the king, though. One of the townsfolk summoned a doorway to Eldrasa, on behalf of Kru. An invitation for the orks and elfin to invade. To take your kingdom from you. We executed him, but quickly found he wasn’t alone.”

Shannon winced, “Are you certain? What we’ve been hearing sounded like nothing more than a witch hunt.”

“We killed four people.” Yio replied, “No more than that, but it wasn’t soon enough. The gateway to Eldrasa is stable. There’s close to five hundred orks where that village used to be. Everyone else who was there is dead. I was the only survivor, despite everything I did to protect them. Those orks you just met, they were waiting for me. They’re hunting me.”

Shannon sighed, “Then I guess my mission just became even more important. That gateway must be sealed.”

“Go home, little sister.” Yio said with a touch of anger, “You can’t help here. It’ll take more than your barrier to stop this. Ask your priestess for guidance. Maybe you’ll actually get it.”

Emilia looked up, glaring, but Shannon raised a hand.

She wasn’t sure why, but the less information that Yio knew about them, the more comfortable she felt. This wasn’t a glorious goddess sitting in this cold and wet cave in the middle of nowhere.

This was a lone warrior, hunting her prey. The orks were her prey. They might think they were hunting her, but she knew it wasn't the case. It was obvious to anyone watching.

Yio was something dark, and something dangerous.

"The Miracle of Damnation is useful in these kinds of situations." Shannon said softly, trying to gauge the reaction of the fallen goddess.

She looked up, her black eyes staring into Shannon, no doubt looking at her aura and history. Trying to pierce the veil and discover who she was. Also no doubt failing. Shannon wasn't leaving this situation to chance. She'd already protected herself, sealing a barrier around her soul. It wasn't something she could keep up for long, but long enough to have this conversation on equal footing.

Yio glared at her, and then slowly smiled, pulling back her hood again, and relaxing, stretching out her hands to the fire. "Well, then. You're not a Sister are you? You're an Inquisitor. Are these two, as well?"

"Yes." Shannon replied flatly, hoping that neither of them would answer or go into any detail. They didn't have the protection of miracles to get them through the coming fight. They'd be just as weak against the orks as Shannon was feeling. As she had felt.

Yio sighed, "Why would my sister appoint you as an Inquisitor? You've never fought before."

"I have." Shannon said with more shame than she'd intended. She didn't feel fear because she couldn't fight. She'd lived a hard life as a child. She'd known pain and fear everyday of that life. She'd fought. She'd stolen. And she had survived because of it.

Yio looked at her in surprise, "I've misjudged you, apologies. You don't have the courage of a soldier. Unafraid to fight because it has become the norm. You have always been afraid in battle... But you've killed, haven't you?"

Shannon winced, but didn't say anything. There was nothing that needed to be said. Murder wasn't something to be proud of. It was no accomplishment to end the life of another person. It was a regret she carried, and would always carry. It was the source of so many of her nightmares. The source of so much of her shame. Not all of either, but enough.

Yio pulled a fish from a pocket, and skewered it. She placed it above the flames, just barely letting them reach. "We'll have to move in a couple hours. No rest for the wicked. How do you suggest we go about this plan of yours? Of saving the village?"

"I don't have a plan, yet." Shannon replied, smoothing the ground in front of her, "I don't even have a layout of the village. Of the orks' movements. Of where the portal is. Those three pieces of information are vital to any plan succeeding. And if there is anything more than orks."

"There are elfin as well." Yio began sketching a series of roads on the smoothed area. "They are a bigger threat than the orks. Well, apart from the head ork. I know him. His name is Mo'tkar. He's Kru's right hand. If he dies, she'll come, and she will resurrect him. If we close the gateway, all we'll do is invite her attention. She has a dozen incursion points into this world. We can't make this one seem unique."

Shannon looked at the map, at the positions that Yio had laid out. "Here. And here. These patrols... They go back and forth to the portal, don't they? Exchanging information or food or something."

"Orders, and resources." Yio nodded, "Is it a vulnerability?"

"It is." Shannon sighed, "Sarin forgive me... I know what to do. It will invite Kru's wrath..."

But there won't be anyone to lash out at. I need you to get me to here. I can take care of the rest."

Yio looked at the position, frowning, "Without being detected? That's not possible."

"Detected or not." Shannon shrugged, "I just need to be in that position."

Yio glared at her again, "Who are you, human? Two or three miracles isn't entirely unheard of for a saint. But a saintly inquisitor? A saint can't be a weapon of war. The two ideas are completely foreign to each other. And a weapon of war can't feel fear."

Shannon glared, "I think I've been clear I don't want to tell you that. So how about you stop trying to break the seal I put on my soul?"

"I already did stop." Yio replied, "I was just going to pick the minds of your companions here, but I can't. I'm not quite sure why. You haven't protected them in the same way. In fact, I don't think you're protecting them at all. But I can't read their thoughts, memories or timelines. The best I can figure is that they've been blessed by Sarin against exactly this sort of interrogation. Which would make sense for inquisitors."

"They've been blessed with Sarin's protection." Shannon shrugged, "Not quite the same as the barrier, but close enough."

Yio frowned, "It increases luck to the point of ridiculousness, but it still doesn't prevent them being injured or killed. War is chaos. Luck, even good luck, is only enough to save you, not enough to guarantee your survival. And make no mistake, you have walked into a war. A war against a very powerful woman."

"Goddess, actually." Shannon replied.

Yio smiled slowly, "So you know a little of Kru, then."

"I've met Trei."

Yio seemed to flinch, glancing at her wrist for a moment. "He's a hell of a man."

Shannon nodded slowly, "And he did warn us before we came. We knew we were walking into something, even if we didn't know what. But Ozandius is over if the orks can expand from here... Why the snow, Yio?"

The woman scratched nervously at her wrist, "Snow?"

"The snow isn't normal for this time of year." Rin whispered, "Even frost is unusual."

Yio shrugged, "I had nothing to do with it. And I don't think the orks did, either. They hate it. They're a desert race. The elfin love their rain forests. Maybe they did something. Or maybe it's a side-effect of the portal. The two climates from two different realms interfering with each other."

Shannon shook her head, "That doesn't quite ring true. There's magic here, intention. The snow is designed to make the landscape harsher... Someone else is trying to contain the orks. Keep them locked in these mountains."

Yio blinked, "Huh. You might be right... But what human has magic enough to change the climate? Your paladins killed most of them off, and the rest died at Calis, serving Vastras."

Emilia spoke slowly, "I do know of a tale from this region. An old one. It tells of a strange man who walks the shadows, who speaks and the mountains echo his commands. That is something that might have the ring of truth to it. A creature from an older time may have taken refuge here. He may simply be protecting his home, rather than the humans infesting it."

Yio tapped her chin, "A druid, maybe. A dwergaz also fits, but they were wiped out before

the orks were even created. A survivor would have to be thousands of years old, and the dwergaz weren't any longer lived than humans. Either way, we could use their help."

Shannon nodded grimly, "Any idea how to trace them?"

"All magic has a source." Yio shrugged, "Any of you a Pathfinder?"

Emilia laughed, "There hasn't been a Pathfinder in three generations, Lady Yio. That blessing is lost."

Rin looked up from the flames, "What's a Pathfinder?"

"A gift to some sisters." Yio replied, "It allowed them to... Sniff out magic. Follow it, like a hunting dog. They usually guided paladins to their prey, in the old days. Most weren't well-treated. Seen as barely-tolerable magical halfbreeds by most. I think once the last war between humanity and the goblins ended, most were killed. A few were allowed to return home, but their own people killed them."

Rin shivered. "The temple really does have a lot to pay for."

Yio smiled, "Inquisitors. So Sarin is finally cleaning up her act. Cleaning out the scum from her own backyard. About time she stopped looking at everyone else and did something about it."

Shannon didn't say anything. Yio was getting under her skin. Making her angry. She was so casual about all of this. As if she was barely above boredom. That all of this was just a hobby for her, despite now being mortal. As if all of them were beneath her. That was the problem. Yio still thought of herself as a goddess, and they were just children poking around in the dark.

"Rin." Shannon stated.

The redhead jumped in surprise, but Shannon didn't say anything. She just kept looking at the fire, waiting for the sister to crack. To admit what she was, and what she had done. To show the others who she was.

Yio smiled slowly, "You're a Pathfinder?"

"No." Rin winced, "Not like that. I get... Impressions. Sometimes. How did you know, Sister Shannon?"

Emilia shifted uncomfortably, "Impressions?"

"Visions. Thoughts. Feelings." Rin said bitterly, "I thought no one knew. I hoped no one knew. Is that why I'm here? Is that why I'm an inquisitor?"

Shannon winced. She was so upset she was going to let Yio know everything. "No. You're here because Sarin requested it. That's why we're all here. Handpicked by the goddess. Maybe Sarin knew what we would face, and gave us the tools we need, so that we can survive this."

"You're an empath." Yio stated, "Some species can see the spirit of another. The aura. A reflection of the soul, comprising all it's wants and desires. Humanity doesn't have that gift, but they do have empaths."

Rin frowned, "What is an empath?"

Yio shrugged, "It's... Difficult to explain. You interact with the aura's of the people around you. You feel what they feel. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the tie and effect on you is. Visions when someone is so angry they're willing to kill. So in love all they can think about is the other person. Most empaths aren't powerful enough to see visions. They just get the feelings, often without knowing where they come from. You're sort of like a mirror for the soul. I haven't met an

empath in two thousand years. I'm surprised that even Sarin could find one. . . Do you know if she arranged your birth?"

Emilia swallowed, "Is this ability magical?"

"No." Yio replied, soothing the woman's fears, "No more magical than taste or touch. It's just another sense. A sense that can feel others. The magic to conjure a storm like this one would take a considerable amount of emotion. If we get close, then Rin might be able to point the way."

Yio seemed to remember things after hearing them once. She paid attention. Shannon would have to be even more careful. "There's another option. Rin. Give me your hand."

She didn't want to show Yio another miracle, but she didn't have a lot of choice. They needed to get this over and done with as quickly as possible, and she did not want to be caught here in the midst of a war for months. They needed to find their ally. Immediately.

She had affinity. She could feel the minds of others. Rin was a mirror. Together they formed a loop. An unending cacophony of emotion and thought. The heartbeat of the world. Shannon took the nervous sister's hand, and felt them connect.

It felt like two lattice works falling together, binding together. A hundred thousand connections snapping into place. The world around her, in this bitter and cold placed flared into life. The ground beneath her feet when from a stark and damp white into something else. She could feel the life running through it. Feel the flames gathering and coddling life too small to be seen by the eye.

She could feel the others. Feel what they felt.

The rabid anxiety of Emilia, her fear of the violence. Her memories of wartime. This woman had seen death and destruction. When she looked at Yio, she felt true terror. A terror built up from memories of watching those around her burn. When she looked to Shannon, her feelings were nothing but confusion. Admiration, awe, fear and anger. Emilia didn't know what to make of her. Whether to call her a heretic, or lord.

Yio. The quiet burning anger. Yet, rising above it, a distant and permanent contentment. She had found her place in the world. Whether she lived or died didn't matter to her anymore. Whether she succeeded, or failed in her mission to stop the orks, didn't matter at all. She was content simply to go with the flow. To stand and be a part of events, rather than to attempt to guide or control them. She wasn't a Fate anymore, she was just a person. That was the source of her happiness.

Shannon concentrated on turning her mind afield, feeling Rin flow with her. They weren't one voice, they were still distinct people, but the line between where Rin ended and Shannon began was blurred. Two voice within the one mind. Two hearts with one purpose. They listened to the roar of the winds, to the snow falling. Everything echoed with the voice of life. Echoing out in every direction.

She could feel the indistinct blob of angry voices in the village. Feel the crack the rebelled against her senses that was the gateway. She could feel something else beyond the gateway. A voice louder than any other. Shannon wrenched her mind, dragging Rin away. They couldn't lean towards that voice. They had another purpose here, and couldn't afford to be discovered. To trace the whisper speaking to the air.

She found it. A light shining brighter than any other. Shining brighter than even Yio. A life that was full of magical power. She couldn't see it clearly. The aura was too bright. She could barely see the mountain it was sitting on. Shannon flinched, feeling the light stare back at her.

She let go of Rin, and they both fell forward. She hadn't noticed it, but it had been an effort.

She was drenched in sweat, breathing hard. Her hair was dripping onto the snow, melting it. She looked a right mess. Not exactly the perfect image of a High Priestess. The elders would panic if they saw her in this state. She smiled slowly, "He saw us. He'll either run, or come find us."

Yio frowned, "He?"

"He." Rin said weakly, "I've never seen anything like him... He is so bright. So bright... I've only seen two people shine like that before. Shine like a star in the sky. I can hardly stand to be around them. They don't even seem to notice how blinding they are... How the entire world is rewritten around them."

Yio blinked, "Huh. They sound like gods, or something close to it. Who were these two? Might give us a hint who this mysterious man is."

Rin laughed, "She's one."

Shannon looked over at Rin in surprise, "I look like that? Since I became... What I am?"

"No." Rin smiled at her, "You've always been like that. Even when you were the brat getting caught stealing food from the kitchen."

Shannon blinked, staring at her. "How in the hell can you stand to be anywhere near me?"

"Took some getting used to."

Yio yawned, "So. This sister who really doesn't want me to know who she is. That's not much of a hint. Who is the other?"

Rin shrugged, "The man who helped send us here. I think the woman with him had an aura, but I couldn't see it next to his. Everything drowned in his."

Yio raised an eyebrow, "Wait... Someone sent you here? Not Sarin?"

Shannon sighed, "King Trei, and Queen Summer, opened a portal for us, to speed our journey."

Yio flinched visibly, "Holy crap. Trei is a new god. Even if this mysterious guy has a tenth of that aura, he's practically a god. We don't want his attention if we can help it. Especially if he noticed you reaching out from here. He can find us. Easily."

Rin frowned, "I don't think aura's of that size are purely power, Lady Yio. Sister Shannon isn't exactly a goddess, and she's very nearly as bright as Lord Trei. You can see her aura, or a part of it. I see it... Differently than you. More in connection with life, emotion, and will, than magical power. I think."

"You're an empath." Yio shrugged, "You see how well connected someone is to the world. How important they are. The light will grow and fade for most people. I used to shine as bright as Trei. I probably don't shine at all now."

Rin shook her head, "No, I don't think that's how it works."

Emilia glared at her, "Lady Yio would know."

Yio shrugged, "Nah. It's been two thousand years. Who knows how an empath works? The gods do stuff like this all the time. Make one unique person. Mostly because they're bored. Sometimes for a reason. It isn't that easy to describe an ability like it. For someone like Sister Rin, this is all she's ever known. How old were you when you finally realised not everyone feels what the people around them do?"

Rin smiled weakly, "Ten. It was... Traumatic."

Shannon sighed heavily. The world felt so dull now she wasn't feeling what Rin had felt. What she was continuing to feel. Rin felt everything around her. The ground beneath her feet wasn't just a surface. It radiated. The world around her was constantly speaking. Her experience of life was far fuller than what Shannon had, herself. It made her feel more than a tad jealous, even if she didn't understand the drawbacks yet. Every gift had drawbacks.

Her head shot up, and looked in surprise, just outside their ice cave.

She heard Yio grab her sword, but she didn't draw. There wasn't room enough to draw.

Emilia turned slowly, not noticing what everyone else had.

The stairs to the cave slowly melted, lowering the shadow in front of them. He waved timidly, "So sorry. I thought I would like to speak to you, but this is too small a space. Do you mind terribly if I make it larger?"

The snow around them melted, curving the walls further outwards until it stretched into a comfortably sized room. The figure sat down on a snowy bench, and smiled weakly, "My apologies. I do not deal well with small spaces."

Yio glared at the figure, "What in the hell are you?"

He seemed almost human, but not quite. His skin was dark, like a human's, but it was also scaled. The colour was the same as many of the slaves that Shannon had met over the years, but the scales were new. Something she'd never seen. He wasn't human. He was something else. His eyes were orange, fading to red. Almost like his eyes were burning from the inside. Most of his face was obscured by a black beard. Not quite a beard. Almost like a mane. Like his beard was simply an extension of the smooth and silky black hair running halfway down his back.

And he wasn't wearing a hood in the middle of a snowstorm.

He ignored Yio, glancing at the others, and smiled at Rin, "Ah. You're the one I saw, but less. A worldwalker. It is an honour to meet you, miss."

Rin gave a quick bow out of habit, and then indicated Shannon next to her, "She is the one who made me more, sir."

Shannon smiled slowly, and stood up slowly, curtsying, "And it is my honour to meet you, sir."

He scratched his beard, plucking ice crystals, "Pardon? You don't even know who I am yet."

"To learn your name would be an honour." Shannon acknowledged, "But I know your race. I know why you haven't spoken your name. I've only recently learned that other races truly exist, but I hadn't considered yours. I certainly never considered that any might still exist today. To treat you as anything less than a lord would be beyond disrespectful."

The man grunted as she sat down again, and sighed, "I gave up those aspirations a long time ago, miss. I'm a man, nothing more. I defend my home, because it is all I have. Nothing more. You want to defend yours, that I acknowledge. I don't know if our two goals are compatible, not yet. I am not a killer, not anymore. Peace is all I seek. Your kind seem to find war under every stone you turn over."

Yio glared, "Someone want to let me in on the secret? What is he? I've never met something like him. I've met most of them."

Shannon turned her head in surprise, "Seriously? You haven't worked it out? It isn't exactly difficult."

Yio glared at her, one hand resting on the pommel of her sword.

Shannon rolled her eyes, “Fine. Sorry, sir, for the disrespect. Lady Yio, meet one of the first races. Meet a Wurm.”

Yio’s eyes boggled, “You’re a freaking dragon?”

Mytris

He burst into the temple at a sprint, spotting Antoinette in the hall easily.

He skidded in front of her, leaning on his knees and breathing hard.

“What the hell are you doing, Mytris?” Antoinette asked in confusion, and he sucked in lungfuls of air, “Evacuate. Now.”

Antoinette didn’t understand, but she knew him well enough to trust him. “Sound the alarm. Get the sisters to the cloister.”

Eri bowed and sprinted off. He heard the gong beginning to sound.

Antoinette raised his head, “What is it, Mytris?”

“The king.” He struggled to catch his breath, “He’s coming to kill Shannon.”

Antoinette clenched fist, “Shit. Oh crap. Because of the queen.”

Mytris looked at her in confusion, “Queen?”

Antoinette nodded, “Queen Summer of the Fae. She came to warn us, about... Heavy things. Worse things than Yurk invading. Damn. Well, I’m in charge, so I guess this is my mess. Look, the sisters are going to the cloister. Nobody outside the temple has been in the labyrinth, and that’s not about to change. I need you to defend the entrance. I’ll see what I can salvage of this crap situation.”

“You’ll die.” Mytris stated, looking at her in horror. He knew she didn’t care for him, not in the same way, but all the same... He loved her. He couldn’t lose her. Not over something as pointless as this. The guards weren’t about to be talked down by some little girl. A girl who couldn’t fight, a girl who couldn’t use magic, and didn’t have the direct protection of her goddess.

She smiled at him, “No, I won’t. I might get kicked out of the temple though.”

Mytris shook his head, “You won’t be able to reason with these people. Antoinette. Please. Don’t throw your life away.”

“I’m not.” She snapped, glaring at him, and pulled back her hood, “I’m going to tell them my name. My real name. The one I was born to. A name that the king will want to use.”

She turned and walked away from him, towards the outside of the temple.

He didn’t understand, but he knew he wasn’t going to be convincing her. He didn’t know her name. Maybe it was important enough someone would tell the king. Maybe it wouldn’t be. Either way, all he could do was defend the entrance to the cloister.

Antoinette

She walked out confidently into the sunlight. It felt strange to show her face so openly, it had been years since she had. She needed to, if this was to work. If she was going to have the moment to say what needed to be said. Talk only works when someone stops to listen. The palace guards weren't known for their compassion, or mercy. They were villains. They hurt people because they thought it was their role to hurt people.

However, most of them would hesitate to hurt a beautiful woman. Not because they were kind. Because damaging such a fine product might limit their entertainment when they hurt you in other ways. Worse ways. Ways that cut right to your core. The same way that Shannon had been hurt, that she was certain of.

Antoinette flinched.

Shannon had been abused. And then she'd offered herself to her. And she'd made a complete mess of things. Way to ruin the best relationship that had ever happened to her. Even if that relationship was currently leading to her standing on the steps of her home, watching the sunlight bouncing off steel in the distance. Steel that was coming to kill her family and burn her home to the ground. Men wearing that steel that would violate their traditions, and then violate the sisters themselves.

She was a complete failure.

The soldiers paused at the threshold, and she curtsied, "Before you attack, I need to speak to someone who can tell something to the king. We aren't going anywhere. There's nowhere to go. The temple is in the middle of the city."

There was a moment's confusion, but eventually one guard stepped forward, removing his helmet, "Speak, wench."

She smiled slowly, "Would you please, inform the king that the heir to the Yurkian throne, the Third Princess, Ariadne, is willing to talk."

The guard raised an eyebrow, "And why should we believe you, wench?"

"I am Princess Ariadne. You can see my face. Check my portraits. There's a couple in the marketplace, usually." She replied.

The guard's face fell in shock. Probably considering how worthless his life might turn out to be if she wasn't lying. If she really was the last surviving heir to a kingdom. If the king heard he had insulted her.

The guard grabbed someone nearby, whispered in his ear, and the man took off running. "So, how shall we wait for the king's response?"

She knelt, tucking her robe carefully, "I have trained as a Sister of Sarin. Prayer and meditation are a part of my life. A moment's quiet is not something I am ungrateful for. Yet, your men may feel uneasy. You may wish to decide how to entertain them."

It was subtle suggestion. The suggestion that the soldiers might suddenly choose to attack, with the life of royalty in the balance. That they might start fighting amongst themselves. If she was even to get hurt, it might be his family that got burned to a cinder. He was probably regretting being the volunteer to step forward and talk to her, and might be considering forcing someone further up the ranks to take care of it.

Either way... The guard turned, "All but the eleventh column! Stand down and return to the

palace!”

It was the obvious choice. A hundred men was still more than enough to deal with a bunch of frightened women with no fighting skill.

She was bargaining with her life. It was the only thing she had that was able to twist events. She was ruining her life in the process. She'd be ransomed or forced into a marriage. Or executed. She never really knew with King Iza. He was unpredictable at times. A king who sometimes let his heart overrule his head. Hearing that a royal family from another kingdom had been hiding out in his backyard might not go down that well with him.

The guard leaned on the fence, looking idly at the temple, “Do any of you ever think about melting down all that gold? There's a city starving here.”

Antoinette laughed softly, “Yes. That's one of the first comments our High Priestess made on her appointment. The others are taking some time to come around to the idea. But she sold a dress to Black Jack recently.”

The guard blinked in confusion, “You're High Priestess... Even knows who Black Jack is? Aren't they meant to be above the people? Above all the petty crime?”

“The High Priestess was a pickpocket, in her old life.” Antoinette replied easily, “She ran with the midtown boys before the temple took her in. She's not above anyone. She's one of us. Well, one of everyone else.”

The guard laughed slowly, “I guess being princess doesn't matter much inside those walls.”

“No.” Antoinette shrugged, “It never did. I was hoping it never would.”

The guard paused, considering her, “So, what is this High Priestess of yours like? You seem to know a bit about her.”

“She's a friend.” Antoinette tried to say without choking, only partially succeeding, “Only reason you're not dealing with her is she's busy dealing with a rebellion in the south. She's kind. She's a tiny bit timid. She knows right, and she knows wrong, and she doesn't tolerate those who can't tell the difference anymore.”

The guard blinked in surprise, “Really. That'd be a first.”

“She's evicted one elder, and demoted the Priestess to the lowest of the low sisters.” Antoinette shrugged, “You can't change everything overnight. But she's trying.”

He shook his head, “So. How did a street kid become your High Priestess? I can't imagine that was quick.”

“Oh it was.” Antoinette grinned, “Sarin showed up, and said she was High Priestess. In front of everyone. She did the same in front of the king. She was a low sister before all this started. Me too. I guess, technically, I still am. But because I'm in charge of discipline, everyone just sort of treats me like an upper sister now.”

“Your goddess... Actually turned up?” The guard looked at her incredulously, “You mean the woman who only turned up at Calis to tell Prince Azrael, rest his soul, that he was a failure? That goddess?”

Antoinette sighed, “Well. I thought it was obvious, but apparently not to you. Sarin is not a god of war. She guides events. She's a Fate. She put her faith in a man who is now the King of the Fae. Do you know what King Trei was? He was human, once.”

The guard shivered, "I saw his eyes. That is not a human."

"He was once." Antoinette smiled, "He died. Killed by a mage. The same mage that Azrael was serving in Calis. Vastras. Before he died, he was a blacksmith. Can you imagine it? A simple blacksmith in a town of magic... And now he's nothing short of a god."

The guard glared, "I wouldn't toss heresy about so readily, sister. Not in front of your own temple."

"Sarin is the one who told me." She replied.

The man started, "You a prophet, now?"

"No." Antoinette shook her head, "Just a servant. And servant's need to be useful. So she's told me a few things about how we got here. And why. Practically gave me an exam on it."

He rolled his eyes, "So, is this bit about you being a princess just as much bullshit?"

She considered her answer slowly, and then nodded, "How about I let the runner answer that one?"

The guard turned, and waited as the runner came sprinting in. The other guards moved aside as one, the metal they were wearing rattling violently. The man skidded to a stop, holding up a parchment with the royal seal.

The guard broke it and unfurled it easily, "Well... Uh... The king was already aware of your existence. I'm not to harm you, and I'm to kill anyone who even looks at you the wrong way."

Antoinette rolled her eyes, "How kind of King Iza to warn you I was here."

The guard glared at her for a moment, before he continued to read. She could see the strain on his face. The man was barely literate. He moved his lips and was resisting the temptation to trace his finger on the parchment. That was another oddity. Usually these edicts came on paper. Especially in a situation where you might need a runner. Nothing like cracked parchment to obscure intent.

"I'm also to tell you that... The king has made an offer of marriage to Yurk already."

Antoinette felt her stomach flop. So that really was going to be the answer to all of this. A loveless marriage. One where she would have to give birth to a son, to produce a new and uncontested heir to the throne. Which would decimate even the kindest of relationships. She might be allowed a consort, if she was lucky. But there was no world in which her consort could be the High Priestess of an entire kingdom. Nobody would be willing to overlook that.

The guard winced, "However, my orders to destroy the temple remain the same."

Antoinette glared, "Yeah, that's not happening."

He stood up, handing the parchment to the runner. That was why it was parchment. It had a valid warrant included. A warrant that decreed the death of all of her sisters. The king was willing to offer her, and her alone, a way out of this. King Iza might have even thought he was being merciful. Not killing the princess, and avoiding the death of the High Priestess. But these were her sisters. Her family.

"You'll have to move me out of the way." Antoinette said, standing up slowly, "I'm not sure that fits with your orders."

The guard gritted his teeth, "I have a warrant. If I don't execute it, then everyone here will be executed. Please. These are my men."

“And they are my sisters!” Antoinette shouted, “If you want pity, this is the wrong place for that. If you want mercy, you’re praying at the wrong altar. I won’t allow you to kill eight hundred women just to satisfy the paranoia of a blind old man!”

The guard winced, “I’m sorry. It’s better I die for touching you, then all my men die.”

“I will not go quietly.”

The guard advanced.

Falien

He smiled, dropping down from the carriage, and waved goodbye to the embarrassed girl in the back of the wagon. Her parents hadn't seemed to notice at all. She had been quiet, and he'd indulged her. No need to give an excuse for interruptions.

The woman stared at him with a crimson face as the wagon moved on.

It should have been a small town, by the looks of things. Just a few huts and shops held together by the crusaders who dared to live at the outermost edges of the kingdom. However, small it wasn't anymore. The refugees were packing out the town, leading to a massive number of tents and fireplaces. Desperate people, trying desperately to stay alive. He turned and walked into the only obvious tavern in the entire town.

Falien sat at the bar, and smiled sweetly at the woman behind the bar. She turned and poured an ale, "What brings you here, stranger? Passing through?"

He smiled, speaking hoarsely, "Something like that. How far is Yurk now?"

She shrugged, "You came from the front, didn't you? You'd have a better view than I. Last I heard was three days out, but that was a week ago."

The warband were moving slower than Falien had expected. Maybe his disappearance had become a problem for the general. As much as his father and he did not get along, there was still some respect for each other. It wouldn't take long before some proud soldier claimed to have killed him.

Falien touched the metal in his pocket. He was harder to kill than any of them realised. He would remind them of it when they got here.

Until then, he wanted to relax.

He sipped at the ale, trying not to notice that it was stale and almost tasted like piss. These were the outskirts, that was to be expected, and his taste buds were probably still scorched.

He smiled at the waitress again, watching her melt. Her inhibitions slowly falling away as he looked at her. Her willpower sapping away as she felt the desperation inside her climbing to a feverish cry. The mind rejected itself, giving up. She probably couldn't speak at this point. Couldn't say what she wanted.

Falien turned, "I missed out on the beds here, didn't I. By a few hundred refugees."

The waitress put a hand on his wrist, "Oh, I wouldn't say that. You could share mine."

Verity

The goblins had broken through the ranks. They weren't alone. Trolls and worse were among them. The goblin shamans had turned the tide of the battle. She'd been blasted out of things when one had struck the general's cart with a fireball the size of a small boulder. She'd hit a tree on her way down.

Now she was dancing in the snow, her sword cleaving through the small creatures without hesitation. They went down quickly. They had no armour, no skill. The blood stank, and burned her sword, ruining it. She dropped the blade, snatching a spear from a fallen creature, spinning the blade edge through another goblin without pausing.

They weren't skilled. They did however, come in great numbers.

Alone she'd killed nearly a dozen, but she knew this was just the dregs. She could hear the main force fighting in the distance, hear the orders of the general barking, and the soldiers moving as one. She wasn't certain if that meant they were gaining ground, or surrounded.

The goblin in front of her popped, and Verity dove to the side to avoid the acidic blood. She looked up in surprise, and saw the goblins scatter from sight. There was someone standing there. Someone she hadn't expected to see.

Verity raised herself to her knees and bowed, "Goddess."

The woman laughed, grabbing her hand and lifting her upright, "No need to stand on ceremony, prophet. I wanted to talk to you, not talk at you."

Verity smiled weakly, "Apologies. Wrodin has been my tutor."

The pink-haired woman shrugged, "Ah. Yeah. That bastard. He's been stripped of his rank and powers. He's human now, or something like it. I am Sarin, Verity. You and yours are marching on Ozandius. Now, I'm sorry I had to scare up such a massive goblin army, but I really needed to delay you. To give Shannon a fighting chance against Kru."

Verity swallowed nervously. So Wrodin was gone, then. He was the one who had declared her a prophet. Had the goddess come to finish the job?

"Prophets belong to none of us, and all of us." Sarin replied to her thought, "Ask me anything you want. We have time to have a pleasant conversation."

Verity nodded slowly, "Who is Shannon?"

"My High Priestess, and avatar." Sarin replied, "She's taking over the temples in Ozandius. Purifying them. Clearing out the old guard who cling to the ways they established. The rules and pointless shit they put into their rituals. Shannon will turn my temple into a weapon. A weapon against Kru, not against mankind. For mankind, the temple is a hope. That's why I can't let you endanger it."

Verity looked at the knees of the goddess in concern, "Who is Kru? Who is she that she frightens a Fate?"

"She's a goddess." Sarin shrugged, and raised Verity's chin so she could see her black eyes. "Kru is more than my equal. She's a new goddess. She was a Fae. She's also the one behind the orks that haunt your dreams and visions."

Verity winced nervously, watching those endless eyes, "A goddess is attacking Ozandius?"

"All of humanity." Sarin shrugged, "Kru truly believes that the way to save all the worlds, is to

unite them under her own banner. To unite them with a unique magic. A cursed magic. It's called the Fel. She stole it from the last master. He was human once. Then he created ork-kind. The Fel is... Madness. It controls your desires, in the end. You become a part of it, rather than the other way around."

Verity flinched, "Yurk needs to defend Ozandius, then. Defend your High Priestess. If she's our only hope against the Fel..."

"There is no hope against the Fel." Sarin snapped, "Kru is the heir of Kao'el. There is no one who can stand against her. None of you mortals, anyway. The best you can do is survive. That's all you can do. For that, you can trust in Shannon. She can help you survive, but she will need your help, Verity, before the end. You. Not this army. This army can't even stand up against a few hundred thousand goblins. What are they going to do against Kru's army of a million orks?"

Verity's face went white, "A million?"

"That's the advance guard." Sarin stated grimly, "The Burning Lands currently house more than ten millions orks. Three million in Eldrasa, where the attack is coming from. The size of these armies isn't like anything your world has ever seen. The largest army amassed by humans, ever, was less than a hundred thousand. A single ork can match ten of your best fighters. Orks are mages. Orks are beserkers. Pain doesn't slow them down, it makes them more dangerous. Kru's army eats entire valleys. They drink rivers dry. The mountains shake as they march passed. Human kind doesn't stand a flying fuck of a chance. Not even with my help."

Verity cringed, "Then what? What do I do? How am I supposed to help this High Priestess? I'm a soldier."

"No." Sarin snorted, "That's your hobby. You are a prophet, Verity. From the moment you were conceived in your mother's womb you were appointed as a vessel of the gods. You are not human. You are not a soldier. You are our voice in the dark. When I can't lead my priestess, when I can't reach her because I am too busy trying to stop you idiots from killing each other, she can turn to you. You can illuminate the path. Without you, the world ends. Without you, Shannon will make mistakes. Mistakes that will kill everyone. She needs you. She needs you now."

Verity rubbed the back of her head, feeling terrified. The gods had never been this forward. They'd never demanded anything of her before. Now she was being asked to infiltrate enemy territory, to back the woman who was the biggest unknown, the greatest threat against Yurk.

"Verity." Sarin snapped, "Ozandius isn't your enemy. Nations won't matter for much longer. Humanity's only chance to survive is to unite. It doesn't matter if you are Yurkian. The title doesn't matter. You had the bad luck to be born in one location than another. That's all. It shouldn't have any bearing. Shannon will still welcome you with open arms. She doesn't care about shit like that. What matters, is what you are willing to do."

The woman sighed heavily, "Falien. Why did you let him hurt me? Why do you let him run around hurting everyone? If you care about us, why is he essential to your plans?"

Sarin winced, going still. "That's a decent question, Verity. You're right to ask it. I don't have permission to tell you the answer. Not right now. But you deserve an answer. Maybe you'll get one before this is all over. But right now, the gods need him."

Verity looked back where she could hear screams, "I can't do this alone. Spare them."

"I will." Sarin replied, "I've already set Ruth aside. She'll come to you when we're done here. She'll be by your side. I can't guarantee either of you will survive. This is god against god. Whatever

I do, Kru can undo. We're matched. We rely on people like you to change the field of battle. Kru has her own heroes. You're one of mine. Well, one that belongs to all the gods, anyway."

Verity swallowed nervously, "I will do what I have to."

"Good." Sarin replied.

Verity glanced back, but the goddess was gone. She braced herself for the return of the goblins, but instead she saw them slinking off into the forest, retreating. So they really had only come because Sarin had compelled them.

She sighed, dropping the burned spear to the ground. Goblins ruined every weapon you used against them. Most goblin hunters only used cheap armour and weapons, easy to replace.

Footsteps crunched on the snow, and Verity saw Ruth stumbling out of the trees, dazed and bleeding. She ran over, catching the woman as she fell. She winced, holding a hand against the bloody wound on her neck. Sarin hadn't promised to save Ruth. Just promised they would meet. The gods were always cruel.

Verity tore off a piece of her tunic, and put it against the wound, forcing Ruth to hold it. "Don't speak. Hold it. Tight."

The woman nodded weakly, her eyes beginning to flutter.

Verity tore off her breastplate, opening the bag she kept inside, and she held up the only Faen flower inside. The last of her supply. It was damaged. One of the leaves had begun to rot. Usually, this would make it useless to her. But right now, she didn't care. She needed the power, the magic. She was willing to pay the cost, to save her friend.

She bit the flower.

Verity screamed as the pain raced into her. Her veins felt like they'd lit on fire.

She found herself in a desert, kneeling and bleeding out onto hungry sand that absorbed the droplets pouring from her face instantly. She looked up, spying a woman sitting on a throne made of skulls. It wasn't like the Ozandian throne. It wasn't made of elfin and goblin skulls. They were human. Every single one of them.

The woman had wings, and her mouth was full of fangs. Her eyes glowed red. She leaned forward, glaring, "Who are you? The Fel is mine. You dare to touch it, you stupid mortal?"

The petal. The petal was rotten. Corrupted magic. That was Fel.

Verity winced weakly, "An accident, I'm sure. I ate a Faen flower."

The woman smiled slowly at her, "You're not a mage, are you? Your experience with magic is... Incomplete. Untrained. Your aura. I haven't seen one quite like that before. What are you, human?"

The way she said human was insult. As if she could scarcely stand to admit that humanity existed. As if they were a plague on reality. As if they deserved to die. She knew who this was. This was the one that Sarin was so afraid of. A goddess. And Verity was a prophet, connected to all gods, even this one.

"I'm a voice." Verity croaked, her throat cracking in the dry heat of the desert. "I see things. Things the gods want."

The Fae on the throne stood up slowly, walking over to her. "Is that so? Can you see what I want?"

Verity shrugged, “I don’t know. I don’t even know how I got here.”

“That’s easy.” The woman laughed, “You’re not. You’re projecting. Or rather, I’m forcing you to project. You’re tied to me so long as you hold the Fel. So, let it go, and I’ll let you go back to your life.”

“I need it.” Verity said through gritted teeth, “Ruth is dying. I need to save her.”

“A love?” The woman asked, and then shook her head, “No... You haven’t loved before. Felt lust, yes, but never love. That’s as beautiful as it is sad, human. Your life is short. A few decades and you’ll die. Why not let yourself feel happiness? Feel whole? Few species have the same opportunity as humans. The opportunity to love and be loved, even more than once. Why do you deny it?”

“I’ve never felt it.” Verity stated, “Why would I deny it?”

The woman nodded slowly, crouching in front of her, showing off her fangs, “True. This was an accident. You chose to risk a damaged flower to save a friend. A colleague. I’m not quite sure, your feelings aren’t that strong. I doubt they ever will be. You are damaged, child. Not surprising. I can see your memories. I can even see our friend Sarin warning you about me. Apparently you didn’t take that warning seriously enough.”

“We can’t fight you.” Verity growled, “I know it. All you’re doing is playing with your food.”

“No.” Kru shook her head, “I’m seeing whether or not I want you as my lich. I could do it. From here. Transform you into one of my mages. Make you a force of corruption in your world. An infection to help scourge away humanity. From you, I could control all of Yurk, without any effort. I could do it now, unless you release the Fel.”

“I won’t abandon Ruth.”

Kru laughed, “So serious. So much effort on the behalf of someone you barely give a voiden care about. You are... Interesting. I’ve made up my mind. You can use the Fel, this once. If we meet again, I’ll probably turn you. I think if I leave you, you’ll grow. You’ll become something worth my time. You aren’t there yet. Goodbye, strange little human.”

The power burned through Verity violently. She felt it pouring from her as the wound beneath her hands stitched together impossibly quickly. She’d never felt magic on this scale before. She could feel the trees around her exploding as the life instantly vanished from them. They became lifeless husks, falling to the ground and shattering apart.

Ruth coughed weakly, her eyes closing peacefully.

Verity wiped the blood away from the wound. There wasn’t even a scar. She’d done it. She’d healed her friend, someone that the god she’d met at the gateway between life and death said she’d need.

She cradled her head, breathing heavily.

Three gods in two days. She’d met three gods. This was beyond odd, and beyond dangerous. She could not afford to be caught up as a pawn between two sides. If that happened, then her life was forfeit. She wouldn’t be able to oppose them, or stop them. Both sides would punish her for her inability to resist the other side.

Fuck.

Shannon

A wyrm. That was what he was. An ancient species older than almost any other. From a time when magic was the norm, and a lack of magic could get you killed for being different, disgusting. There was always hate in the world. Always violence.

He'd asked to talk to her alone, and though she terrified of him, she was also glad to get away from Yio.

The black-maned man waved a hand, looking at the valley. "This has been my home, for hundreds of years. I've grown accustomed to it, and those that filled it. They're dead, dying, or worse. All the same, I don't kill, miss. That is the creed that I live by. I've brought snow and blizzards to this valley. I've closed all the roads that I can, trying to force them to retreat back to their world. I won't abide by death. And your kind always bring death."

"If there's another way, I'll take it." Shannon sighed heavily, "I already have two deaths on conscience. That's more than enough."

He turned to her in surprise, "For one so young as you, to carry such deep pain. It affects you. Every part of you. You were young... Could you not say that is was justified? Release yourself from this guilt?"

"It was justified." Shannon said, feeling somewhere between anger and agonising sadness, "But the guilt will always be with me."

The wyrm nodded sadly, "I'm sorry. I do not mean to bring back the harm. Yet I must know your heart, if I am to assist you in this task. Your companions are not the same as you. The worldwalker is like me. To see death, is to feel death. She would not wish it upon anyone. Could not. The elder one however, is cruel and calculating. Death for her is nothing more than the form of a function, the result of a series of necessary actions."

Shannon, winced, "And then there's Yio."

He smiled, "She has not changed since she was a Fate. She will do whatever she believes is right. She will not regret it. That is her way. That is also why my people avoided her and her sisters, to the point where we were nearly not found in time for the restoration of reality, following the breaking."

She didn't understand everything he was talking about. Most of history was a mystery to her. Humans weren't particularly good at remembering their past, remembering where they had come from. There were only a handful of myths about his species that survived, and most were nothing more than cliches. Wise, powerful and old creatures guiding the young hero, or cruel and malignant beasts that must be slain. One consistency was the name. The name of a dragon was the power of a dragon. If you had their name, you could command them.

"What are you, little miss?" He asked, breathing the cold air, "What won't you tell Yio?"

Shannon blinked, "I'm Sarin's tool. High Priestess over her temple in this nation."

He nodded slowly, "Interesting. It might explain some of your nature, but not all. Do you know why it was that Sarin selected you as her authority in your nation?"

"No." Shannon shook her head, "I'm nobody. I was even the lowest ranking sister. Maybe that was the point. To shake up the temple. Make people sit up and pay attention that everything they were doing was wrong. I'm supposed to fix it. Make the temple a first line of defence for situations like this. We're not warriors. But we can be what the world needs. A group devoted to bringing the

peace, a negotiated peace. The world is changing... New gods... We need to find a way to balance it. To get everyone through without the fear. Without the hate."

"Nidoghr."

Shannon glanced sideways at him, "Pardon?"

"My name is Nidoghr." He sighed, "I am one of the last of my kind. There are others, but few. We devote ourselves to an ideal world. Sometimes that requires battle. Sometimes it requires death. I am different than my brethren. I swore an oath never to kill. Never again. I lost count. I actually lost count of the number of people I have killed. It horrified me when I realised. I decided to devote myself to living with the world. To breathe with it."

A monk. A dragon monk living in the mountains in the middle of nowhere. She could certainly see the appeal of the idea. To give up the world, and the expectations that might be placed on you. To try and find peace within yourself.

"Thank you." Shannon said, unsure of what she should say. "I wish I had an answer, Nidoghr. I'm not sure it's even possible for a human to negotiate with the woman behind this invasion. From what I know of Kru... She only respects power. She has goals, and rules. She lives by them, but no one outside of herself has any impact on them whatsoever. To make her pay attention, she has to see you as a threat. I could close the portal, but she'll just open another one. Or come in person, and then there won't be anything I can do. She's a legitimate goddess. A new goddess."

"Her power was inherited from Kao'el." Nidoghr said softly, "It makes sense that she is difficult."

The goddess of chaos. The creator of the 'verse. Unpredictable, beyond powerful. Kao'el wasn't cruel, and she wasn't kind. She did what she felt she wanted to do. Understanding her reasoning, or her thought process, was generally beyond what any mortal could do. It was too easy to apply meaning to her actions. You could twist anything she did to fit an understanding, and it would be no more right or wrong than any other viewpoint. That was what made Kao'el so dangerous.

"You know, Kru, then?"

"I do not." The man shook his hair, flowing in the breeze, "But I knew Kao'el. I knew Wintralassa. I hope they still exist, somewhere. I hope their love continues to bloom, despite the crimes that Wintralassa committed against the gods, and against Kao'el. They were both kind, and both placed into impossible situations. Disaster was always inevitable. The gods of that era... They cruel. Truly cruel. It was not neglect. They didn't neglect anything, except freedom. They forced themselves upon this world. Forced Wintralassa to stand up against them. Forced her to steal magic just to give her people a chance."

Shannon's eyes widened, "This... Wintralassa... She is the one who stole magic from the gods? That story of how the world was recreated... That's true?"

He looked at her and blinked, "Ah. A young race, you humans. Yes. It was a bitter war. My kind never really chose a side, or rather we chose a side but could be convinced to change it again. We fought against them at first, the mortals. Our cruelty nearly ended that war altogether. It was the courage of Wintralassa that stopped us."

Shannon frowned, mulling over the new information, "You said you hoped that she and Kao'el... They were lovers?"

"Yes." He smiled, "I can see the confusion. Before, and after, the war. They both loved each other dearly, but their war required they stand against each other. Required that they sacrifice their relationship for their respective peoples. War is cruel, young one. It takes what you didn't even

realise you had to offer.”

Shannon sighed heavily, “I know. This one hasn’t even started, and I feel like I’m already losing what is mine.”

“You are a strange beast.” Nidoghr laughed softly, “So much fear, so much anxiety... And yet you haven’t considered not taking action.”

“Considered.” Shannon laughed, “But rejected. There are people counting on me. People I care about. People I’d rather didn’t survive. All the same. They’re counting on me to pull a miracle out of my ass to save this world. Heck, most of them would be crying in a corner of a dark room if they even knew orks existed.”

The wyrm nodded his regal head, “It is difficult to be a leader, at times. Make no mistake, you are a leader of the people. Not just a representative of a belief structure. People look to you for answers, even when there are none to be had. It is a cruel fate. A painful responsibility.”

“I bear it.” Shannon answered simply.

The wyrm smiled broadly at her, “Your courage is inspiring. Truly. You have no answers, no plan that could possibly succeed, and yet you are willing.”

“Do I pass the test?” She raised an eyebrow.

“I gave you my name.” He responded with a chuckle, “You passed then. Now, I look to you as a comrade, as we prepare for the coming storm. I look to you for advice. I do not believe it would even be possible to fight this enemy, even if I had not sworn my vows.”

Shannon frowned, “I was given seven miracles. Seven. There’s two that are violence incarnated. They could both stop this army in it’s tracks... But people would die. And it would be my fault... I didn’t know other races existed. I didn’t. The temple preached it was heresy, that only mankind was true. That the others were myths made up to try and explain events in history. There were gods, and there were men... As much as I nearly pissed myself when the ork attacked me before, those eyes weren’t unintelligent. It was a person. An angry, freaking terrifying person, but a person.”

“Insightful.” Nidoghr nodded, “Yes. Orks are people. Elfin are people, and far worse than any ork. An ork will kill you, skin you, eat you and wear your skin as clothing. But an elf will torture you. They will heal you. And they will continue to hurt you until they break you. Then they may not even grant you death, tossing the insane and broken rabble out into the forest. To most elfin, anything that is not an elf is not a person. They live by that creed that you have been taught. This is the result.”

Shannon looked down at the snow, feeling utterly helpless. “Why does Kru want to invade? What does she want from us?”

“Power.” He answered sadly, “All she wants is to control and expand her empire. There is no great ideal. There is no greed. There is nothing there to reason with, little priestess. What she wants is this world united under her rule. Nothing more, nothing less. She does not want your precious stones, or metals. She does not want your people as slave labour, though it may well be a result all the same. What she wants is to own everything.”

Shannon felt fear trickle down her spine.

She’d encountered someone like that once before, and only once. Someone for who the rules didn’t work. You couldn’t punish someone like that, all it did was reinforce their own perspective. You couldn’t reason with them. They were simply exercising their rights. No individual was important enough to matter to somebody like that. They might have friends, family, and even lovers.

But if the price was right, they would toss them aside. There was no regret for someone like that. The only remorse they could feel was that they hadn't acted fast enough to claim their ownership.

She touched her heart gently. For someone like this, if they could own something, then they would mark it. Make sure that everyone knew it belonged to them. If Kru could not have this world, then she'd either taint it, or destroy it. She wouldn't allow it to continue on the current path, no matter what.

There was a small hope, though.

Shannon smiled grimly, "Summer said she'd speak to Kru, about negotiating a temporary ceasefire. If I attack these orks, then I screw that opportunity. I need to expand it. I just have to hope Summer has already got to her."

Nidoghr turned to her slowly, "You're going to surrender yourself to them."

"To ask an audience."

He shook his head, "They will kill you."

"Protect the others, Nidoghr." Shannon ordered him, looking down at the valley, "Keep them safe. I will be back, I promise."

"Do not promise what you cannot keep." He said with irritation.

She smiled at him, "I'm not. Trust me. Please."

The wyrm shook his head, "This is foolish. What would you accomplish by yourself?"

"Attention." Shannon shrugged, "One lone woman, who they can't kill because of an impossible barrier? It should be enough to catch attention."

The wyrm didn't seem to agree, but neither did he stop her.

If she was going to put lives at risk... It would be her own. Not everyone else's.

Mytris

He'd heard Antoinette scream angrily. Not a scream of surprise, or pain. The sound of fighting, and then everything had caved in. The whole world turned to absolute shit.

The entrance to the cloister was at the back of the temple, as far from prying eyes as it could get, hidden behind a painting the size of a wall. The sisters had all got in safely, but he couldn't shift the painting on his own, so he'd decided just to stand, stand ready to fight.

Instead of guards bursting in with swords, flames had. The walls and roof and floor were alight.

There was nothing he could do.

The air was thick with black smoke, burning his eyes and lungs. The fire's heat was so close now he could feel his skin blistering, and he couldn't run. Couldn't hide. He was surrounded and trapped, standing with his back against the painting as the flames closed in around him.

Just like they had for his family. At least his death would seem appropriate. He couldn't get to the sisters. Could ask them to let him into the labyrinth. Make them break their rules. That opportunity had come and gone. The way between him and the entrance to the cloister was on fire.

He was just going to die here. Gasping out his last stupid breaths.

Then someone would pull his body from the ashes.

Antoinette

She was bound, hand and foot. Forced onto her knees. The chains were tight enough that she was bleeding where they bound her, and it was barely enough.

She glared at the guard, who was touching his torn open cheek gently, trying to stop the bleeding. She spat on the ground. He'd deserved it. She'd given him every opportunity not to become this. To avoid it. Instead he'd ignored his humanity, and decreed the deaths of innocent women. Because the king was jealous and stupid.

She growled, yanking on her chains, feeling her wrists crack under the effort.

"Stop that, princess." The guard sighed, "You're not getting out just because you want to."

She glared up at him, "You have no idea what you have done here. None. You haven't just killed these people. You haven't just hurt me. You've given her a reason. How stupid are you all? You want to piss her off? You've done it. You can't it back. She'll kill you, and everyone you know."

The guard rolled his eyes, "Sarin? She never gets involved."

"Not Sarin!" Antoinette snapped, "Shannon! The freaking High Priestess! She has the power of Sarin, and she is not to be trifled with! She's not that forgiving, idiot."

He shrugged, "I think we can handle a priestess. She'll burn with the rest."

"She's not here." Antoinette said bitterly.

If Shannon had stayed, then maybe none of this would have happened. Maybe peace might have been an option. It wasn't now. Not with this. It wasn't just the sisters who would die. This was the powder-keg that would kick off the whole city. Give everyone an excuse to come out in numbers, and to go for the crown.

The average people would be horrified, not understanding. In their confusion they would turn to the charismatic people around them. Most of them would turn to Red. A fiery figure that everyone knew. A hero to some, a villain to others. But a man with a cause and people backing him. A man who had just lost his sister in the flames. Right after he agreed to talk with the temple, to try and bring about a better future.

Any hope of peace died in this fire.

And then there was Shannon.

That girl would arrive back in this city... And her heart would break. Everyone she knew. Mytris killed. Antoinette imprisoned and sold off as an effort to end the war. It wouldn't work. Couldn't work. No army would be able to stop her. She had Sarin at her back, and she was vindictive and cruel. Under the sweet sister was a heart that still spoke the angry violence of the street. The heart that would toss aside an elder sister without a second thought.

This time Shannon wouldn't be putting slimesnails in someone's breakfast.

What violence could she achieve with the power that Sarin had granted her? Antoinette hadn't seen the limit to the miracles yet. She didn't know every miracle that the woman could cast, but she was leading an inquisition. They weren't all peace and happiness. Violence would come as well. Incredible violence.

Screams began to emerge from the temple.

Antoinette looked down as hot, angry tears began to fall from her eyes. Faces moved in her mind. The faces of her friends. Her family. Dying because of an idiot. Dying because he'd already

pissed off the Fae. He expelled the Fae, and then acted out when they went to speak to someone else.

It wasn't fair, and it wasn't just!

She punched the ground, feeling her hand crack as if she'd shattered bone. She didn't care. It didn't matter what happened to her now. She couldn't fix what they had done.

"What the fuck is this?"

Antoinette looked up at the voice. A voice she knew.

A tall man stood there, glaring at the guards. He was carrying a sledgehammer, as were the other miners behind him. He wiped soot from his face, stepping forward, "Put it out. Now!"

The guard beside her turned, "Orders of the King, citizen. Move along."

"Fuck you!" The man snapped, the hammer in his hands spinning through the face of an unprepared guard. The entire unit snapped to attention, drawing their swords. The miners didn't really have a chance.

But they still fought.

Antoinette looked away bitterly. She didn't want to watch more people die for a lost cause. She still remembered her passage here, fleeing from Yurk. Everyone she had met was dead. They all died, one after another. Some she saw, some stayed behind to buy her time, yet they all died. Pointlessly. She'd known then she'd never be allowed to return to Yurk alive.

A hammer slammed in front of her, shattering her chains.

She stared in surprise and stood up, looking at the man in front of her, splashed with blood. He shouldered the hammer and turned, "Put it out, boys! Brigade!"

Antoinette turned, watching as the bucket brigade formed up, and saw the fallen soldiers. Beaten and shattered. How had he done that so quickly? They were trained guards. They'd fought rebellions before. How was a handful of miners able to match them so easily?

The man put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, "We'll fix this, sister. The temple will never have to fear the king again."

"You can't." Antoinette winced, "Save them, yes, but he'll come for me."

He looked sideways at her, "So they spared you on purpose. Why?"

"I'm..." She sighed, "Does it even matter anymore? We've lost this. We're not fighters."

"I am." He replied, "And so is every one with me. We've been fighting for years. We've given the king his chance. Now it's ours, and we know what we have to do. It will get done."

"Don't. Don't die for a cause you can't win!" Antoinette hissed, "A couple dozen guards is not an army! If you take the city, what then? How will you stop Yurk? Stop Kru?"

The man blinked, "By the power of your High Priestess, and the goddess she represents."

Antoinette paused, looking at him again, "You're Red, aren't you? I didn't think you were religious."

"I wasn't." He shrugged, and then turned his hammer so she could see what was on the side of the head. A symbol blazing there. A symbol she knew.

"What?"

“Sarin came to us.” Red said, looking with concern at the burning building in front of them as the roof began to collapse, “She sent us here.”

Antoinette’s eyes widened, “The hammer. The sisters are in cloister, forget the building. It’s too far gone. You won’t stop it in time, but if that hammer has the power of Sarin behind it, you might be able to break the ceiling, and get in to the cloister. Quick.”

She sprinted off behind the temple, Red trailing with two others. She concentrated. She wasn’t organised. She didn’t have a great memory, but it mattered, and right now it mattered for everyone.

She bit her lip, “Try... Here.”

Red stood over the point and lifted the hammer, slamming it down. The ground shook and cracked violently. Red hefted the hammer again. And again. The grass and rock exploded, flying out around them. Antoinette shield her face with her robe, not taking her eyes off him as the flat ground began to cave in around the man. He struck violently, and frantically.

Falien

He woke up slowly, stretching lazily, feeling the warmth of her chest against him.

It was unusual, but he didn't want to leave immediately. He had nowhere he needed to go. The people he wanted to kill would come his way eventually. All he had to do was wait, and he would get everything that he wanted.

It might be fun to explore a more long term relationship. See how his presence effected someone on a daily basis.

"What...?" He heard a timid whisper and looked down at the shocked waitress. "Good morning."

She looked up at him in shock and terror, "Shit. What have I done?"

He smiled.

She flinched as if he had hit her. "What the hell? I... I..."

She was fighting him. That was new. Most people weren't even aware of the effect he had on them. They usually blamed themselves and moved on. He smiled, "Hey, what's the matter?"

"Shut up." She snapped, glaring at him, "Seriously. Not one word. You're a freaking Tyrsan, aren't you?"

He considered her. He wasn't about to speak, since she'd told him to shut up. However, she had named him as something. He didn't recognise the word at all, but if she thought she knew what he was, then she might actually know more about him than he did. That was worth staying to find out about. None of the scholars at home had been much help, and he'd given up explaining it years ago.

The waitress sighed heavily, scratching at her hair. He blinked. He'd thought she was a blonde. But the strands she'd messed with were fading. Becoming white. So apparently she might not be human. Was she a Fae in disguise? Sent as a spy? It would make sense, if his father's predictions about a Faen invasion were true. If the rumours were true.

The waitress glared, stepping out of the bed and snatching her bra from the bedside table and strapping it on, "You don't even know what you are, do you?"

"Not really." He laughed, "Lucky, I guess. You could call me lucky."

"No shit." She snapped dragging on her underwear and grabbing a dress from her wardrobe. She turned to face him and his face fell. The dress was brown and of poor cloth, like most of the stuff these outlanders were wearing, but there was a symbol emblazoned across the left breast. A symbol of a god.

"You're a sister?" He asked in surprise. "I had hoped to meet one again, but I thought you all wore those... Modest robes. The head coverings and all."

She glared at him, "Things are a bit tougher out here than in the cities. What's your name?"

"Falien." He grinned at her, "And yours?"

She rolled her eyes, "Freaking hell. You managed to drag me to bed, and violate my oaths, and you didn't even bother to learn my name. I'm Sister Guinevere."

"Gwen, then." He smiled.

It didn't work. She shot a look of pure hatred at him, and then sighed, "Well. If you want to

know what the fuck a Tyrsan is, I'm headed to temple. You're not going to talk to anyone about this crap. Got it?"

He shrugged, standing up slowly, and stretching in full nudity. "So a sister works as a bartender?"

"Everyone has to work around here." She snapped.

He was enjoying the hell out of her anger. It really would be a massive kick to stay around. He might even convince her to get so angry that she couldn't resist and would jump him again. That'd be a wonderful new experience. He didn't tend to let relationships last to the point where someone could actually learn to hate him.

He pulled up his pants and swung his shirt over his shoulder, "Lead on, sister."

"Fuck you." She snapped and stormed out of the room.

He shivered. He liked it when she did that.

Verity

She sat next to the fire, shivering. Ruth lay nearby, still asleep. She hadn't woken up since Verity had healed her. She might not. Maybe she was infected with the Fel. It was an option.

Verity was alone. She'd done as she was told and abandoned the army. The moment she and Ruth had left the forest, she'd heard the goblins screeching retreat. That was the stick, and the carrot was Ruth. The gods would keep her on their path. She wouldn't be able to fight her fate. It had already been decided for her.

She had to make her way to Ozandia.

Verity unhooked her pauldrons. She'd used the breastplate to drag Ruth here, but she needed to find something else, and soon. Every piece of her armour held an inscription of Yurk on it. Soldiers were owned by the capital. They were treated as runaway slaves when they deserted. She and everything she had was property of the king, technically.

She tossed her armour into a pile as she unhooked it. It felt strange to be without the comforting weight. She felt exposed in the dark night. Alone. All she had was fire and a friend in a coma. She was easy pickings for bandits and thieves alike.

Verity turned her head, seeing it before it came around the corner. A cart and horse, lit by a small lantern. She knew this cart. These people were the ones who had saved Falien. Taken him to Caledon. They were refugees, trying to head towards Ozandia, by the backroads.

She stood up, waving a hand, "Ho, there!"

The cart slowed, and the driver waved a hand, "You in the dark, be you friend or foe?"

"Neither." Verity replied, and waved to the fire, "You're welcome to join me. Your daughter as well."

The man stepped off the cart, placing a hand on his sword, "How do you know us?"

Verity sat back down by the fire, "By the gods. You did that man a turn, by saving him. Too bad he was a dick."

The driver drew his sword cautiously and moved over into the edge of the light. He saw Verity's armour, and Ruth lying so still, and he sheathed his sword slowly, "You're a deserter."

"Not by choice." Verity warned him, "As I said, by the gods."

The driver scoffed, "How would the gods know a Yurkian soldier?"

Verity looked up at him, "The gods don't care about borders or petty skirmishes, sir. I served Wrobin as a child. It seems in recent days that I will serve Sarin. I don't get much of a say in it."

He nodded and waved to his cart, "You know my daughter. You know what happened."

"I can guess." She winced, "Falien... He did the same to me."

The driver's face softened, "I should have let him die in the snow."

"Then I wouldn't know you." Verity smiled, "Come. There's enough hostility in the air. Warm yourself. Keep her warm. She needs more than either of us."

The girl was young, barely of age. She was a brunette, and seemed to be ashamed of herself. Verity could understand it. She knew however the blame should rest plainly with the man who had used her. Had made her his.

The driver frowned, placing his coat over the girl and positioning her close to the flames, “You called him Falien. You know him, then?”

Verity smiled slowly, “I do, but you won’t like it.”

The man shrugged, “I am Danren. I was a cobbler, before all this started. Before I could see soldiers from my home. We’re headed towards Ozandia. I never expected someone I saved from the grave to be so... Cruel. We stopped at Caledon, but the roads from there are too dangerous. We’re circling out a bit.”

Verity sighed, “He was Prince Falien, heir of Yurk. The child your daughter now bears, is the rightful heir to the Yurkian throne after its father.”

The girl looked over in fear, and the cobbler groaned weakly.

It was a death sentence for both of them, if anyone were to find out.

Verity shrugged, “I’m sorry.”

The man sighed, “Where are you headed, soldier?”

“Ozandia.” She sighed heavily, “They have a High Priestess. I’m supposed to talk to her. Not sure why or how...”

“Come with us.” The girl said quickly, “We can help you with your friend.”

Verity smiled at her, “Thank you, for the offer. But I’ll be a danger to you. My accent is clearly Yurkian. I can’t blend in as a civilian.”

The cobbler frowned, “No, my daughter is right. Travel with us, for a few days. We can help you get close. The least we can do to repay your kindness.”

Verity shrugged. These people were too kind. They’d already been hurt.

They had no reason to help her, but she did know that time was running out. She needed to get to Shannon, or the gods might punish her. Or worse, the High Priestess would make one of the mistakes Sarin had promised.

Lives hung in the balance. Just not her own. It never had. She’d never had a choice over her own future.

Shannon

She sat quietly on the rooftop, watching the orks and the elfin.

It was all coming back to her surprisingly quickly. How easy it was to sneak passed bored guards. People who weren't expecting anyone to try and mess with them. Bored guards stationed on rooftops, looking down. Not up. Not right beside them.

She moved quietly, making almost no sound at all. The elfin were sensitive. They seemed to hear her coming, but none of them really thought much of it. They didn't seem to notice her enough to be bothered. She didn't sound like a person, and she'd learned to stop before they'd be bothered to pay attention to the sound. Nothing more than a cursory glance in her general direction.

She'd managed to make it to the square.

She could see the gateway from here, or what was visible. It didn't look like much more than the air shaking. She couldn't tell how big it was, or where it exactly was. There was no shining light to direct her. Just a hint from what was blurred.

She could also see the ork that Yio had called Mo'ktar. He stood out. Most of the other orks had pitch black skin, but his was just dark. He was also taller, and stronger. He stood on the side, watching the orks. He didn't seem to pay attention to the elfin. There was probably some argument between the two sides. He was their conqueror. Or a symbol of them.

He was the one she needed to talk to.

Shannon turned and jumped into the square. Before she hit the ground she felt a bolt of fire slam into her side. She hit the ground rolling, tossing it to the side, "Come off it!"

The ork pushed off the wall, grabbing his hammer, and she held up her hands, "Dude. Why would I be attacking in the open?"

He held up a hand, and Shannon glanced nervously behind her at the elfin caster who had attacked her and had another bolt of fire ready to go. She turned back, "I wanted to talk, to you, but mostly to Kru."

The ork nodded slowly, letting go of his hammer and walking forward, "It is few people who seek out my queen. Those who wish power, or those who wish to die. Which are you?"

"I don't have much use for power." Shannon shrugged, "I already have it. Power enough to blow this little incursion back to Eldrasa. So I'm not sure you want to count me amongst the weak who die."

The ork laughed softly, "Courage, human. Impressive. Yet you have no magic to speak of. You are not as powerful as Vastras, or even a child elf. What is this power you claim gives you such authority, authority enough you would speak to Kru?"

Shannon smiled, "I am the High Priestess of Sarin."

The ork paused, blinking in surprise, "Sarin. The Fate has a church?"

Shannon shrugged, "In Ozandius, at least."

Mo'ktar grinned, "Ah. The paladins who died pointlessly at Calis. They were of your church, were they not?"

"They were also told not to fight Summer." Shannon shrugged, "Pig-headed men. They charge in, not realising what's at stake."

The ork twitched at the insult. Then he sighed, "You speak for Sarin, then?"

"Yes."

He nodded slowly, "Not even a hesitation. Can a mortal like you really speak for a celestial?"

"Yes." Shannon snapped, "I've already told you that. So. About Kru..."

Mo'ktar shrugged, "No. No you can't speak to her. And you will die here."

That didn't make sense, telling her. Shannon rolled as the flames passed through the air. She bounced off a wall, her fist slamming into the elfin face with hesitation, and then she pulled back, holding her hand. The elf glared down at her, revealing curved fangs in their mouth.

She didn't have a choice then. "Damn you."

The elf immediately began screaming, grabbing their head as smoke began to slowly emerge from the eyes and ears. The elf fell onto the ground, scrabbling and screaming. They contorted, panicking.

Shannon turned slowly, looking at the ork. He made no expression, but no one else moved to attack her. So she was right. This was a test. A test to see what she could do. To see if she was worthy of the attention of his queen. She needed to be more than worthy. She needed to be a threat, or it wouldn't be enough. These people were violent. They thrived on violence. That was how you proved your strength.

"Damn you, all." Shannon whispered.

Mo'ktar groaned, falling onto one knee. One hand scrabbled in the soil, but he stayed upright. She was impressed. This was the miracle, or curse, of damnation. It made your soul feel like it was plunged into hellfire. This man, whoever he was, had to have experienced something like this before to be able to cope with it so well. She'd completely disabled him though, all the same.

She walked up to him, grabbing him by a tusk and raising his head, "How about now? Paying attention?"

The ork laughed painfully, one of his eyes watering, "You... Could have done this before. To get here. You didn't. You snuck in. Why?"

Shannon shrugged, "I guess I'm kind."

The ork nodded, "So be it."

She released the miracle, and the screeching throughout the village cut off almost instantly. It felt odd. Eerie. A town that was screaming, and then it wasn't. An outsider might even assume everyone had died, rather than be taking a collective sigh of relief.

Mo'ktar pushed himself upright, trembling softly.

The ork seemed annoyed she'd noticed. "Weakness does not befit an ork."

Shannon shrugged, "You're the one who wanted me to prove myself."

He nodded and waved a hand at the gateway, "Kru awaits."

Shannon felt a chill run down her spine at that. The way he said it... Kru had been expecting her. All of this was a charade for her own sake. Meant to puff up her own self-esteem.

She was walking into a conversation with a goddess.

The new goddess of chaos.

Shannon flinched and stepped into the shimmering wall.

Mytris

“Boy.”

He looked around himself, but he couldn't see anything. He couldn't tell if his eyes were open. It was too dark.

It wasn't just dark. It was getting cold. He could feel it creeping in. A coldness that clung to his limbs, clutching at his chest. He coughed weakly, grabbing for his chest, but nothing happened. Like he couldn't move.

“Boy!”

The voice was close by. He didn't recognise it. It was loud and firm, and female. That was all he could tell. He had no idea where they were. In front, behind, to his side. He didn't know what they wanted. Why they wanted his attention.

Firm hands grasped the sides of his head, and Mytris groaned in pain as he felt himself being lifted up, and the voice shouted inside his head, “I did not give you permission to die!”

Mytris gasped, and the light flooded his eyes. He coughed violently, ash bursting in front of him. He was lying in ash. The temple. He winced, trying to move. He couldn't. Something had fallen across his back. Solid, and heavy. He had no idea if he could move it. If it was a roof beam, there was no chance. But if he didn't move, he would die here.

He had to move.

Mytris clenched his fists, pushing his hands against the ground, straining and coughing.

Something suddenly gave out, and he felt to the side, crashing the beam across him snapped in half. He moved to his feet, and felt the floor beneath him about to cave in. He leaped across it, towards the brickwork and the window. He flinched, barely grabbing the window sill in time as the floor disappeared beneath him in a puff of soot. He dragged himself up.

An elbow shattered the beautiful coloured window, and he tumbled through it and onto the ground, coughing violently.

He heard someone nearby, and then a familiar face leaned over his stained, with blood and soot. He smiled weakly, “Red.”

The man grinned, reaching down and pulling him upright, “That's an audible, Mytris. How in the hell did you survive that one?”

He frowned. The voice. They'd saved him. Whoever they were. If they had existed. He wasn't sure what to make of the experience. “Just lucky, I guess.”

There was a crash behind them and he flinched, looking over, “That'll be the rest of the floor.”

Red laughed, “I gotta say, looks like a miracle from here, Mytris.”

He turned, looking at the man in surprise, “Never thought I'd hear you say something like that.”

“Your thoughts change after meeting a goddess.” Red said, shaking his head. “I saw her. Sarin. She's... Something else. Inside your head. Knows you. Past and future. Knows what you can be, what you could be. She's... Different than I thought she would be. Less like a Priestess. More like a street brat. Says what she thinks.”

Mytris coughed, thumping his chest. Wincing as he saw the ash coming up still. “Guess there

aren't that many people to offend when you're a god."

Red put an arm around his shoulders, "Well, Antoinette and Margarite are worried about you. Lets go show them."

The man lead him around to the front of the temple, where the sisters were all gathered around. Most were lying on the ground, being taken care of by the others. Burns and broken bones, but as far as he could see most of them were fine. No thanks to him. He'd stood guard, but you can't exactly guard against fire.

He heard a squeal, and felt arms wrap around him. A sharp pain stabbed through his side and he gasped.

Antoinette pulled back, "Sorry. Let me see."

Mytris protested as she pulled up his top, feeling his side slowly, "Two... Three cracked ribs. Superficial burns."

He smiled, "Thank you, sister."

She glared at him, and turned him around. Mytris looked at Red with exasperation, and the man just laughed. He felt her fingers running up and down his back, "How in the hell are you still moving, Mytris? You've broken something here."

Mytris paused. "A beam landed on my back."

"I can tell. I'm moving pieces of bone around." The sister said with concern, and lowered his top slowly. "Lie on the ground. There isn't a lot we can do, but we need to do it fast. I don't know why you can walk, but it probably won't last."

He lay down slowly, and felt a sudden flash of pain from his waist down. "Shit."

Antoinette touched him gently, "This... I can't fix this."

She was worried. Nearly in tears. He smiled weakly, "I've survived, Antoinette. That's more than I was thinking would happen."

"For now." She answered.

Someone else sat beside him, grabbing and squeezing his hand. He smiled, "Salice."

His sister patted his head gently, "You scared me."

"Scared myself." Mytris answered, "I guess this is what you felt back then."

"No." Margarite replied, "I got surrounded by a cube of light. A barrier. I knew I was safe. I was worried about everyone else... But not me. I knew I'd be fine."

He sighed, "I don't know. I should have died there too."

"Still might." Antoinette interjected.

He rolled his eyes, "Maybe Sarin wants me around still. At least for now."

Margarite sighed, squeezing his hand gently, "We'll see. Things are... Tense."

Red spoke gruffly, "We have the surrounding streets under our control, but that's it. We've had to put up barricades. The king is coming in force, soon."

"He doesn't have force." Mytris said through gritted teeth, "The ten columns of the palace. That's it. That's all he has to defend the whole kingdom. Six of those left for our northern border a few days ago."

Red frowned, “And we killed one here. So the the king has three hundred men left. Not great odds, not bad either. That might be enough to make him negotiate.”

“He won’t negotiate.” Antoinette said softly, “The king... He’s not acting like he usually does. He’s panicking. Something has made him more terrified than ever, and apparently the only way to reassure him is to destroy the temple. If I had to guess, I’d say that he’s spoken to Kru. It’d explain kicking the Fae out.”

“He might just be insane.” Red shrugged, “He lost his son to magic. Maybe now he’s going after the gods.”

Mytris flinched as he felt the bandage around his waist being pulled tight. Then he shivered as he felt water pour over him. So she was making a hard bandage, to fix his back in place. He really had broken it to pieces. That was a death sentence, especially if the king attacked.

“Anyone heard from Shannon?”

Antoinette sighed, “She went to stop a rebellion in Fasfeen. We don’t know when she’ll be back, but she’ll probably have to travel back by road. So she’s two weeks away at the soonest.”

Red spoke, “There’s a new warrior at Fasfeen. I suspect they got people riled up. I’m not sure how much of the reports to believe. A pink-haired woman, carrying a sword. Apparently she’s faster and stronger than anyone down there.”

“Yio.” Antoinette sighed, “Lady Yio became mortal a while back. During the fall of Eldrasa. I don’t know much more than that. I guess it makes sense. A travelling warrior. She could do some good that way.”

Red shrugged, “Or it could be an impostor. It isn’t that hard to die your hair. Most people have problems with heresy, but not everyone.”

“True.” Antoinette answered and sighed, “Things just seem... To happen differently, right now. Too many coincidences. What are the chances all of us have connections? Red, you’re the brother of one of Sarin’s inquisitors. Mytris, your sister is another. You’re a childhood friend of the High Priestess. I’m the head inquisitor. We’re all... Tied. It feels planned. Whatever Shannon has walked into... She can handle it.”

Mytris yawned, wincing as his back flared, “So I guess what you need right now, is a way to get information from the palace.”

Red shrugged noisily, “Nah. I already have a few dozen ways in or out. There’s a couple of the boys over there now. I expect them back around sunset.”

Mytris laughed, “I saw you the other day.”

“I know.” Red replied, “I’ve been wondering when you were going to talk to me. Ask to join us.”

“Wasn’t a plan.” Mytris sighed, “Violence doesn’t work, Red. Look around you. All of these people now have an excuse to fight, and keep fighting, even once the fight is won. An excuse to become the same damn thing they’re trying to stop. He tried to burn our home to the ground, so we’re justified in anything we do.”

Red sat down, “Yeah. It’s a tough one to handle, Mytris. Unfortunately, I think that one is the only path open for us. We’ll just have to better than the king was.”

Antoinette

She was worried. The moment Mytris had laid down, his spine had collapsed. As if the only thing holding it intact had been sheer luck. Maybe it was the work of Sarin that he had survived. Little else made sense. Yet, it didn't make sense that Sarin would leave him in this condition. If she had saved him, then she needed him. Needed him alive. Right now, he was struggling to breathe, and it would only get worse as the connections slowly died.

The only way out for Mytris was the miracle of healing, or magic. If not, he was a dead man. And bringing him back was a wasted effort.

It could have something to do with Margarite. A way to inspire her to pull herself together. The woman wasn't handling the deaths of so many sisters. Antoinette wasn't handling it well, herself.

Sixty.

Sixty sisters dead from the smoke and the flames.

Sixty sisters that had been under her care, her protection. Killed because an asshole decided he was going to stand up and hurt someone. Because he wanted to feel in control of the situation.

Antoinette clenched her fists.

She felt a comforting hand on her shoulder and started, looking up. The pink-haired woman sat down next to her, "So things really went to hell in a hand basket here."

Antoinette was alone. Mytris was asleep, and the others were around the fires, keeping warm and trying to feed each other on the few scraps they could find. Trying to pull together. To stay as strong as they could, to feel brave with the palace breathing so closely to them. Ready to blow out the candle of their hopes.

She shrugged.

"Shannon still cares about you, you know." Sarin smiled, "You were one of her last thoughts before she entered Eldrasa."

Antoinette's eyes bugged, "She's in Eldrasa?"

"Kru invaded." Sarin sighed, "Shannon found nothing but orks and elfin down south. Well, a couple friends, but everyone else is dead. She's trying to negotiate a ceasefire. I have my doubts she'll succeed."

Antoinette winced, "So you with her then. Protecting her."

"I was here as well." Sarin sighed, "I can't do as much as normal. There is a new god in Ozandius. In Ozandia itself. Where they go, I cannot. I couldn't heal Mytris right now. I'm bound not to interfere. There are rules I must follow. Rules that don't apply to the new gods."

Antoinette clenched a fist, "Who is the god, can you tell me that?"

"So you can ask for their help?" Sarin smiled, "It wouldn't work. They don't know what they are yet. It will take time for them to learn. But... I could teach you a spell."

Antoinette flinched, looking down at her hands. "Is... He worth it? Do we need him?"

"I don't know." Sarin sighed, "I don't know much, not with the god so close. The decision has to be yours, Antoinette. The others won't understand, you're right. You won't be able to pass it off as a miracle either. They will know you have used magic. There's a pathfinder amongst the sisters. One that can smell magic. To her, you'll smell like a rotting carcass."

Antoinette swallowed, “If the sisters fracture, then we might not survive this. We’re a rebellion now, even if we never meant to be. I need them united. I can’t fail Shannon. But I don’t want him to die, either.”

Sarin nodded, “I know. I didn’t make the choice for you, and I won’t. It’s a shitty choice. The consequences... Dozens of timelines hang off this moment. Off what you decide to do. Too many. I can’t even tell you if there is a good choice. It’s too unclear. Too many bad outcomes. There are some good... But they’re vague. Undecided. They might disappear.”

She looked down at the man sleeping, breathing painfully, slowly.

He was a friend.

He was also useful to them. He knew the palace. He knew the king.

But in the end, the best choice for everyone would be to abandon him. To let him die. He wasn’t important enough to risk the lives of everyone here. If she was thrown aside, then Shannon might be. The whole temple might end. Sister against sister. A new temple could be made. One the king had full control over. A voice that made the people listen to what he wanted, to believe what he wanted. That’d be the outcome. He’d control them. Control the future.

“Teach me the spell.”

Sarin smiled at her, “You have a kind heart.”

“Don’t make me regret it.” Antoinette winced.

“Well... Magic is easy.” Sarin sighed, taking her hand, “You already have it. Most people act like only some are born with magic. That’s a lie. All of humanity has it. All you need is a little spark to get it going.”

Antoinette looked at the grain of what looked like sand in her hand. It was glowing a soft green.

“This is dust.” Sarin said, “All Fae are born with it. They drip with it. It is also the door that opens the way to magic. Hold it. Tightly.”

She clenched her fist, flinching as she felt like something was crawling its way into her. Like some sort of new strength was flowing into her. Becoming a part of her. She swallowed nervously, trying to control her breathing. She felt anxious, like every part of her was itching to move, to run and fight.

“Now, focus on what you want.” Sarin stated, “Focus as hard as you can, and then touch him. Let no other thought exist in your mind, or it will rebound.”

Antoinette closed her eyes. Meditation came easily to her after all these years. She cleared her thoughts, sweeping them aside. Her worries melted into the background, a dull and pointless sound. Like the waves of the sea. They moved slowly, bringing her down into a silence within the noise. What she wanted was for Mytris to be okay. For the magic to flow into him, and repair things she didn’t understand. The magic had to do the work. She had to let it live, to correct the problems by itself.

She placed her clenched fist gently on his back, focusing.

Mytris screamed, but his voice fell away into the background, becoming nothing but white noise amongst the crashing waves.

She prodded and poked, feeling the magic flow and ebb. It responded to her will, it felt her

desire. It stumbled as if uncertain, but slowly, and surely, she felt the bones in his back realigning. Felt the nerves reattaching. Felt the muscles and sinews stitching back into place again.

Antoinette felt the magic vanish, and she opened her eyes slowly, breathing hard, sweat dripping from her forehead. She blinked in confusion for a moment, and then she fell sideways.

Falien

He wandered after her into the temple idly, looking at the walls in disappointment. The temple in Ozandia had been truly beautiful. Not just covered in artwork and dressed in precious metals, but the architecture itself was that of a master. Impossible arches and ridiculous spires and steeples.

The temple of Caledon was little more than a community hall. A bunch of logs stacked to make a rectangular space. At one end of the space lay an altar, and the rest was empty.

“Have you ever been to the temple at Ozandia, Gwen?” He asked casually, and the sister in front of him just let out an irritated growl.

He was enjoying himself immensely. This was far more fun than he had anticipated. Having someone know how easily he could control them, and fighting back. He’d never experienced it before. It brought the spice, the fire, back into his life. For him, sex was nearly meaningless. He could have whomever he wanted. All he had to do was smile, and they would make the suggestion. But this... This was better than that.

He found himself wondering if he could help her survive the coming invasion. She might thank him for it, or want to make up for it, and that wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted to find a way to help her survive, so he could keep her, but he also wanted her anger and irritation to survive. He wanted her to keep fighting him. He wasn’t sure if such a thing was possible. It would defy human nature.

“Sister Guinevere?” A woman dressed like a farmhand asked, and Gwen curtsied, “Priestess. Apologies, and more. This man behind me, this bloody stupid idiot, is a Tyrsan.”

The Priestess, who truly looked like she was more comfortable in a field with a scythe than in a building with a bunch of books, looked at him slowly, glaring. He smiled at her. The woman’s eyes widened and she shivered, “Oh. We’ll talk about it later. Why is he here?”

“To learn what a Tyrsan is.” Falien answered for himself, “Gwen was kind enough to tell me that someone here might be able to explain.”

“Sister Guinevere, prat!” She snapped angrily, and then turned to her priestess, “Please take him off my hands.”

Falien yawned, “No. That’d be boring.”

Gwen turned to him, one eye twitching, “Do you not take a hint? Get lost. I don’t want you around me.”

“I know.” Falien smiled, laughing, “That’s what is so interesting about you.”

The priestess sighed heavily, “He’s... A Tyrsan, sister. If he wants to be around you, you won’t be able to find anyone who would stop him. Yourself included, in the end. Every time you resist, you weaken.”

That was a disappointing blow. All he wanted was the resistance. So it was inevitable then, she’d become as bitterly disappointing as the rest of women in this ’verse. Willing to compromise any value just to gain his approval. The priestess had already given in. She saw he wanted Gwen, and so told the sister to let him follow her. It wasn’t any sound judgement, it was his effect.

Gwen glared at him with those eyes of hers. Beautiful little diamond blue hues, filled with such rage. He couldn’t help but smile as he looked at her.

The sister blew a tuft of her hair, and sighed, “Fine. Tyrsan is a term that comes from ‘Tyr’.

A mysterious figure that's popped in and out of human history, we think. Legends are completely contradictory, and make no sense. It's a typical myth. Anyway, we call people like you Tyrsan, because like Tyr you can apparently change the course of human history just by being present. Witnessing an event changes it for your benefit."

The priestess shrugged, "Think of it like a kind of luck gone rampant. Like... I could be planting a corn field. But a Tyrsan is walking nearby, and is hungry for tomatoes. When it comes harvest time, it'll turn out I accidentally grabbed the wrong seed, and planted tomatoes. Even though I didn't notice, and that the crops are completely different. A Tyrsan rewrites existence around them. I did pick up corn. But then the Tyrsan meant I never picked up the corn, and picked up the tomatoes instead. They rewrite the past just as much as the future."

Falien frowned, "Huh. Are there many like me?"

"No." Gwen snapped, still glaring at him, "Maybe five in the whole of human history."

Falien laughed slowly, "So how did getting laid make you think I was something that rare?"

Gwen went bright red and the priestess frowned, "He's actually a dick, isn't he?"

"Yes." Gwen sighed heavily, "Because I don't know you. I wouldn't sleep with you. You rewrote me. I noticed. It's like someone jammed a bundle of emotions that aren't mine inside my skull. I know they don't belong. Hasn't anyone else noticed before?"

"Maybe." Falien shrugged, "Most people get embarrassed and run away. But most people are good at justifying their actions to themselves. They reason it away."

Gwen rolled her eyes, "Fuck. So I'm the first one to fight it. That's why you want to stick around. Watch me break. Dick."

"Language." The priestess laughed, "Swearing in the temple? Come on, sister. You're better than that."

Gwen glared at her, "Like you haven't already been charmed. So, dickwad, are you just going to follow me around all day? Wait for me to want to jump you again?"

Falien shrugged, "I have nothing better to do."

Gwen grinned at him, "Fine. I guess I'll clean the latrine today."

It was an attempt to get rid of him. Usually it would work. He had never worked a day in his life. But he wanted to stay by this woman. She was more important to him now than anyone he had ever met, and he wasn't quite sure why. She was just a toy, after all. All toys eventually break.

Verity

She'd waved goodbye to the travelling father and daughter an hour or so ago. Now she was dragging her sleeping friend over the burning grass towards a distant town. She could see it, just over the hill. The last town before the bridge over the river Oz. A small town, but with a bustling trade. Or it had, before the war. She knew that the general would have kept marching. He had his orders. Yurk's forces would be reaching Caledon soon, unless the goblins had got in their way again.

"Verity?"

She stopped, spinning around and smiled with relief as she saw Ruth holding her head, "About damn time, woman."

The soldier sighed, "I feel like I drank three kegs. What the fuck happened?"

"You nearly died." Verity said, stepping over and helping the soldier stand up, "Goblin ambush."

Ruth frowned weakly, touching her neck, "Huh. I thought I was bitten by one of the bastards."

"You were." Verity smiled, "I healed you."

Ruth glared at her, "Magic? Really?"

"You've been asleep for two days." Verity retorted, "I've been dragging your ass for two days, and you're annoyed I saved you with magic?"

"No..." Ruth said sheepishly, "I'm annoyed I didn't get a choice. But... Thank you."

"You won't thank me soon." Verity sighed and turned, "We've been sent. To... Serve the High Priestess of Ozandius."

Ruth elbowed her, "Nice one. Why are we in Ozandius? That's the Oz, isn't it? I don't think they'd let you drag my sleeping ass on a scouting mission."

"We've been sent to serve the High Priestess of Ozandius."

Ruth groaned, "Fuck. This has to do with you being a prophet, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

The woman shook her head, "And why did I get dragged into this?"

"My condition for helping was that you not die." Verity sighed, "The gods refused to guarantee it, but gave me the opportunity to make it happen. They sent the goblins, Ruth. The gods attacked us."

Ruth shivered, "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Why do the gods want to protect Ozandius?"

"They don't." Verity swallowed, "They want to protect humanity. We're all under threat. Every nation. I've seen what we're up against... Do you remember me mentioning orks?"

"Yes." Ruth laughed, "You said they were going to kill me."

"There's a new goddess. With an army of orks in the millions. She's attacking Ozandius." Verity swallowed, "We stop her here, or we don't stop her."

Ruth glared at her, "The fuck. Please tell me this is some kind of sick joke, holy one."

"It's not." Verity winced, "We're all going to fucking die."

Ruth shook her head, "Ozandius. We've been at war with them since before I was born. And we're just supposed to sneak in? That's not possible. Moment either of us opens our mouth, people

will know where we're from. They'll hate us."

Verity nodded, "Possibly. I'm hoping one of the temples can help us. They might, if Sarin lets them know to not kill us. I don't know. I don't like trusting gods for anything."

Ruth laughed, "Ironic. You're a prophet."

"Exactly." Verity sighed, "I know the gods act as little as they can get away with."

Ruth shrugged, pulling off her dented breastplate and dropping it to the ground. "Well. I guess I'm a deserter now."

"I'm sorry."

Ruth rolled her eyes, "It's fine, holy one. You know I'm in it for the thrill. Can't get much more thrilling than this shit."

It was sarcastic, but only slightly. The woman might forgive her one day.

Shannon

She stumbled as her foot touched down on solid ground. The experience had been nauseating. Feeling herself moving through the Void between the realms. Seeing the 'verse laid bare in all its nonlinear glory. And now, she was arriving from snow into a desert.

She stood on the hot sand, eyes fixed on the only feature in the entire area. A stone throne, and a woman sitting on it. Black dust seemed to cascade from her wings, evaporating into the air. Her eyes were a brilliant red.

The woman smiled at her, revealing a mouth of fangs, and waved, "Come. I've been expecting you, High Priestess."

Shannon walked across the hot sand, feeling the heat melting the soles of her shoes as she shuffled across it. This didn't make sense to her. This couldn't be Eldrasa. That was a realm of rainforests. The entire realm was under the canopy of the world tree, Yggdrasil. A tree that was nearly as old and magical as F'rir, its creator. This wasn't a world like that. This was a world on the edge of dying. Everything dying, burned out.

Kru sighed, "Sorry about the accommodations. Eldrasa has... Faced some difficulties. That is part of the reason I've invaded your world."

Shannon looked around her, "The world is dying. How can that happen? You're a goddess."

"I didn't create this realm." Kru sighed heavily, "I stole it. Unfortunately, once F'rir was dead, Yggdrasil died too. I became the only source of magic keeping the elfin race alive. It's... Too taxing. I can't do much."

Shannon frowned, "It isn't quite an invasion then. You're refugees."

Kru rolled her eyes, "It is an invasion. We might be refugees, but we're also a warlike people. We don't want help. We will take what we want."

Shannon glared at her, "I'd rather you didn't."

The Fae laughed, "Oh don't even try. I'm a goddess. I might be weakened, but you are nothing little kid. I can blow you away, mortal, before you were even able to react. You're nothing. Humans are nothing. You're the weakest of all the species. Your strongest warriors are nothing but loose sand blowing in the wind. Your greatest leaders will bow and break at the crook of a finger."

"Maybe." Shannon smiled, "Maybe we are weak. But we are also a warlike people. I'm sure a Fae would know that."

"True." Kru yawned, "But the only humans to have posed a threat to the Fae were Hero, Vastras and Trei. You're not exactly on their level."

Shannon sighed, "I didn't come here to threaten you. I came to talk. To have a talk."

"I'm not that interested." Kru replied, "The orks will take your world. We will make it ours. The Fel will bleed into your world, and into the soil. It will corrupt it and remake it for us. Sarin might have made a world for your people, once. If you want to survive, ask if she can't do it again. Orks do not surrender. Orks do not retreat. Once an area is taken, they will hold it until they all dead. You can't negotiate with me, because you have nothing to offer me. Even your damnation curse is nothing to me. I am the source of the Fel. Damnation would be a pleasant holiday."

The High Priestess looked at the angry Fae standing there, and sighed, "No. I guess it wouldn't do much to you. But I do have another miracle you might be interested in. One I will cast on my

world if you don't leave it."

Kru blinked, "Really? And what would that be?"

"Hellflame."

Kru's knuckles went white as she gripped her throne, "You wouldn't. You would be dooming your world!"

"Better to end your plague here, than allow it to take my people. Better to destroy my world than to allow every world to be destroyed by your stupidity. Your wrath. Your blind pursuit of a goal that you don't even understand anymore!" Shannon snapped.

Kru sighed, "Fine, I guess I can't let you return to your world."

Shannon shrugged, "I can cast it from here."

Kru stood up with a snap, lashing out with a wave of black dust. It swarmed over and around her like flies. Attempting to burrow into every orifice, to swamp her and absorb her. Shannon waved at the them, trying not to breathe any in. Outwardly she appeared calm. Almost bored.

Inwardly she was praying fervently that the barrier would not break. She knew that most people spoke of the barrier of Sarin like it was unbreakable, even the gods... But it was one thing to believe it whilst standing against men and swords. It was another when the most powerful and tainted magic in the 'verse was surrounding you like an angry cloud.

The swarm dissipated and Kru was standing in front of her, glaring at her with red eyes. "I will not retreat. The human world will be mine. All the worlds will be mine. You are nothing but a child. You will not stand in my way. I will bend you, and I will break you. You have needs. I do not. I am sustained by the Fel alone. When you sleep, I will kill you. When you starve, I will watch you die. When you cry for water I will pour sand down your throat."

Shannon looked carefully at the Fae. The only way to save her world from an angry and dangerous goddess was to destroy it. She would be responsible for more death and pain than anyone else in the entire history of the world. Yet, if she did, the other realms would be saved. She had a choice. To save every world and betray her own, or to save none of them.

This was why she was given a world-ending miracle.

To make the hard choice. If she didn't destroy it, then Kru would. If the Fae took the world, it wouldn't be recoverable. It would be lost. She'd destroy it just like she had destroyed this world. Burned it out. The Fel was the cause, not Yggdrasil's death. Even she could see that. The Fel ripped life from the soil, leaving nothing behind. The Fel was corruption. It was an infection that took and took. It gave the owner power, but it drove them senseless. Forcing them to seek more and more power, not realising that the power had to come from somewhere. The Fel was a thief. It took the power from the world around you. Killing it. Killing the ground you stood on for nothing more than a temporary gain.

Maybe Kru couldn't see that anymore. Maybe the Fel had taken her senses. Driven her mad, like the previous source. Maybe she didn't care. She was happy to use the world and move on. For it to be the problem for someone else.

Shannon sighed, "It is done."

The Fae's eyes widened, and she spun, tearing open a series of portals in front of her. Shannon watched on grimly, watching the flames begin to tumble from the sky. Entire villages vanished in the blink of an eye. Forests were scorched and wildfires sprang out of nowhere. Yet, despite the

destruction, she also saw humans. Men, women and children. Fighting to protect their homes. Fleeing. Adapting.

That was the secret of the weakest species. The reason all the others feared them.

Humanity always survived.

Always.

They would survive against even this. The skies would burn, the ground would boil but humanity would survive. Hundreds of thousands would die, but humanity would survive. The Fel would be stopped here, and now. It could be allowed not one step further.

Kru turned to her in horror, "What the hell? You bring the end of your world. Why would you do that? My people just wanted a home!"

"You wouldn't negotiate." Shannon answered, "I could have offered you a home. I could have helped to establish a nation for you. Instead you threatened me. Told me that what you're watching was going to happen anyway. Now it has. My people will survive. We're good at that. Yours won't. When was the last time the elfin adapted? They lost the war to you. The orks lost the war to you. Without their great goddess, they're all nothing. They're weak."

It was a lie. A political lie. She destroyed her world to stop the Fel. To stop the infection spreading out and killing everything, everywhere. Every ork and elfin infected by the Fel had to die. Kru had to die. Or else there was no point trying to save anyone at all. The Fel was a greater threat to existence than anything that happened before. Eldrasa was destroyed by it. An entire realm wiped out by the infection.

"We will slaughter you!" Kru shouted, slapping Shannon across the face. The barrier absorbed most of the blow, but the Fae still managed to turn her head. "Not one human will be allowed to survive. Not one child. I will hunt you to the ends of the realms. I will bleed you dry. Every single human will experience a thousandfold of the pain you have inflicted on us!"

Shannon smiled slowly, and knelt in the sand, touching it softly, "You know, things aren't as bad here as you think they are."

The Fae clenched her fists, about to try and hit her again. The healing spell radiated out from Shannon, and into the soil. The sand gave way, collapsing as the Fel was pushed aside. The soil turned brown, soft. Shoots of grass began to pop up, spreading out around her in a circle.

Kru stumbled backwards, trying to stay outside the circle of the spell.

Shannon smiled up at her, "You know what this means."

"It was the Fel." Kru winced, "It can't be. The Fel is the good. The Fel is the truth."

Shannon flinched.

So the goddess had lost her mind to the infection then. There was only one answer to that, but she didn't know if she'd be able to survive it. She had to cure Kru. Somehow. She had to break the goddess free of the Fel. If that link was broken, maybe there was a chance. A chance that would make her regret the flames scourging her homeland. Killing her friends.

She stood up slowly, and the Fae vanished.

Shannon kicked the ground in frustration. She should have known the woman would see it coming. Would try and stop her.

She turned slowly, clenching her fists as she saw the orks appearing around her. They were

all facing her, weapons drawn. Kru was summoning an army to break through her barrier, her concentration. The barrier couldn't be broken, but she could still be knocked senseless. Terrified into obedience.

The barrier span out around Shannon into a cube, and she flinched as the first wave of angry creatures slammed into it, screaming and dying as their weapons shattered back into them at the full force they were propelled.

She was scared. She could admit that. She didn't really have a choice with the tears starting to roll down her cheeks.

She had fought before. She had nearly died a hundred times over on the streets. It didn't harden her. Each time it had made her more afraid. More aware that she might not come back from things. It didn't matter if she had the backing of a goddess, she was still just a human. She was mortal. She was not a weapon that could wipe out an entire army in a single blow.

As far as the 'verse was concerned, she was a dead woman.

Too stupid to realise that she couldn't actually fight a goddess like Kru. That's what she was. A stupid, completely idiotic mortal picking a fight with a god. Picking a fight with a god so powerful that the other gods were avoiding them. Letting the goddess create a situation that might well unravel reality. None of them were willing to step up to the plate, and she thought she could make a bloody difference?

Kru had already found her solution.

To stop the Hellflame, to create a world she could corrupt, all she needed to do was kill Shannon.

And she would. The army had been summoned, not because Shannon was a threat, but because she didn't deserve Kru's personal attention. Eventually Shannon would buckle. Her will would give out, her miracles would fail, and an ork would bite her head off.

She felt warmth running down her leg as she looked up at the angry creature holding the cube and slamming it's head into her cage. She wasn't being kept safe in here. She was just being kept.

She was going to die, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She'd failed. Past tense.

She would die, eaten by an angry monster from another world, whilst everyone she knew was being killed by her own stupid attempt to stop these things.

Mytris

He felt the crash, and found himself running through a cloud of smoke and flame before he knew what was happening. He grabbed the first sister he saw, dragging them out of the fire and into the street. They keeled over coughing as Mytris sprinted back into the heat. He could feel his skin blistering and peeling, but he didn't have the time to waste.

He didn't know how he was moving, and it didn't matter.

The entire city had erupted. Something had hit the ground in front of them, billowing ash and flames in every direction. Everyone near it had instantly died. He'd felt the heat burn his own clothes before he'd moved into the ash.

He was going to die, he had no doubt. But he could save of them, and so he would.

His hand grabbed the backs of two collars and he wrenched, screaming as he tossed the sisters through the air, and free of the fire and smoke. He fell onto one knee, coughing violently. He looked at the blood in his hands in surprise. That didn't make sense. Fire didn't kill you that way. It had to be something in the smoke. The smoke was poisonous.

He cursed, forcing himself upright, spotting a fallen figure. A sister on her face, spread out and unconscious. He swept her up and ran out of the black smoke, collapsing next to the shattered stone fence, laying her against it gently. He winced as he saw Antoinette's quiet face. He touched her face gently, and turned and ran back into the flames.

Antoinette

She coughed weakly, opening her eyes as she felt blood spilling out of her mouth and down her robes. She touched her cheek, feeling a wet hand print. Someone had saved her.

She couldn't see properly, and her head was refusing to tell her what had happened. All she knew was she had taken a beating. She hadn't felt like this since her uncle had taken to her with a riding crop until she passed out... And then he'd kept going for a while.

There was smoke in front of her. Black smoke. It stank. It was vile, making her want to vomit. Beneath the putrid scent she could smell something else she recognised all too well. The smell of burning bodies. The smell that tried to convince your brain that it was just food cooking. That it wasn't people you knew who had been grilled alive.

She shifted, trying to stand up. Antoinette nearly bit her tongue off as the pain stabbed through her like lightning. She couldn't move her legs. Something was deeply wrong with her body. It was a pile of stinking shit. She wouldn't be moving any time soon. She wouldn't be helping anyone. She was stuck.

There was still movement somewhere inside the smoke, but not much. That had to be the person who had saved her.

Antoinette winced as she smelled the smoke again. She didn't know where the smoke and fire were coming from. Something huge was burning. Almost like a catapult had launched a boulder at the time. But she did know that smell. It was the reason she was lying here drooling blood. It wasn't the smell that was making her want to vomit. It was the smoke. The scent wasn't that strong. The smell of the burning rock and bodies was more. The smoke smelt like grass. Rotting grass.

Even after people had been removed from this kind of smoke, they might die. Their hearts could stop days later.

She raised a weak hand, looking for small burns, lesions. She saw one. That was all she needed to know she was right. This was a poison gas. A gas used to kill. Developed to kill. She'd learned about it as a child, when it was being used by rebels to attack the capital. It was called charred salt, even though it turned into a gas at most temperatures.

It was insidious. But it was heavier than air. If she could get everyone away from here, there was a good chance most of them would survive.

How, though? She couldn't move. She couldn't even see anyone else that was awake.

Her mind turned to magic. A way to transport them away from here. It wasn't an easy magic from what she knew, but she was desperate enough... But Sarin had only given her the one grain of dust. She didn't have any magic to grasp on to.

She was becoming frantic. She knew with each passing moment she was getting worse and worse. She knew the other sisters were still being poisoned. And there wasn't a damned thing she could do. Nothing. She couldn't move. She knew what was happening, and she just had to watch it. Watch everyone die.

She wasn't just becoming frantic. It was her brain, getting stuck. Unable to move on because it was impaired. There wasn't enough air in the air. It wouldn't be long now. She'd pass out again. If she woke up again, it would be too late to save her. She might even feel better, but she'd die all the same. They'd all die.

Antoinette clenched a fist and grabbed the ruptured fence next to her and dragged.

She let out a blood-curdling scream of pain, falling to the ground. She cried and clenched her fists, begging the pain to stop. To quiet down. To let her breathe and exist. It consumed her, blocking out her vision, stealing her hearing.

The sister tapped her head gently on the ground, begging the world to let her be.

The pain faded slowly, and she looked up, to see how far she'd come. To see that she had moved less than a hand span. Hope evaporated. She couldn't do this. She couldn't. Even move once more was probably her limit. She'd rather death at that point. There was no way anyone could live through this kind of agony. She'd rather slit her throat.

They needed her.

Antoinette gritted her teeth, and grabbed the wall beside her again.

She pulled with all her strength, trying to throw herself.

The pain rose up, punching her in the face. She lost sight and sound and taste and feeling. All that was left was the overwhelming pain. Drilling itself into every single nerve in her entire body. Consuming her in lightning and hellfire. It rocked her. It didn't fade. It didn't stop. She bit her lip, crying, begging the world. She would do anything to make it go away. She couldn't move at all, and staying rigid made it worse as well.

She couldn't win against this.

Antoinette caved, lying there and crying.

Falien

He heard it coming. A roar overhead like a dragon had been unleashed. He didn't know what it was. What he did know was that none of these weaklings was remotely equipped to deal with, and that he didn't have time to think. He had to react.

He knocked Gwen off her feet, putting a hand over her mouth before she could scream, and threw his shirt over her face.

He heard her squeal as the flames slammed into him, knocking him flat against her. He felt his skin scorching like the sun. Even having liquid metal poured down his throat was nothing like. It felt just like he was walking across the surface of the sun. His skin blistered and disappeared in an instant. The muscles snapped as they dried and charred, dissolving into the torrent of wind. His organ exploded as the water inside the boiled and became steam in a single moment. His eyes popped as the inside turned to steam, and his ears turned to ash.

If he had been a normal person, he would have long been dead.

He wished he was dead.

He begged the gods to take back this blessing. To take this curse away. To just let him die already.

He collapsed completely atop the terrified sister, as he felt the flames fade into the background. He wasn't sure if it was over, or if he just had no nerve endings left to feel it. He didn't have a single sense left. As far as he knew, he was nothing but a skeleton.

He had no idea if he was even successful at saving the interesting woman. Waking up from this one was going to take a while. A long painful while. He might even just be a skeleton amongst all the charred remains. He hoped that Gwen had survived. He wanted to hear her how terribly he had gone about saving her. She would find the perfect way to thank him without giving him any of the responsibility.

It was strange that he enjoyed her so much now. When she'd slept with him she'd been the same as everyone else. Just a desperate mind and body. No better or worse than anyone else. He had never had a partner who might require his attention. It might be worth it to explore if granting her wishes could bring more pleasure than what he'd known. Not that he was in a particular hurry to sleep with her again. Not until he was sure she wouldn't just revert to type.

"How in the goddamn motherfuck are you still alive!?"

His hearing had returned then. His ears were probably regrowing on the sides of his skull. He tested to see if he had a larynx, and a raw and inhuman sort of sound came out. It was intelligible as words. All he'd done was probably frighten the woman.

Frightened Gwen.

She better not run away. He was extremely interested in her remaining a part of his life. However, watching someone regrow from a bunch of bones was probably not something that anybody would enjoy watching. Almost like a birth, except you were in the womb with them.

His nerves began to reform. He knew it, because nerves screamed like anything when exposed to the air. He couldn't help it. The screams began to emerge from his throat as the pain wafted over him. Demanding that he kill himself. His body crying out that he was a dead man, and that all he need do was end it. End it before his mind was lost to this parasitic pain.

His eyes were the last thing to reform. The world swimming into dizzy view as he lay on his

hands and knees, coughing weakly, his voice spent. Sweat poured off him in rivulets, soaking the char-grilled ground around him.

He collapsed, rolling onto his back, and struggled to breathe.

“What. The. Fuck.”

He turned his head, and saw the terrified woman looking at him. Half of her clothes had been scorched away, and one of her legs was a twisted and burned lump of nothing. So he hadn’t managed to protect her altogether. By the looks of her face, she’d received a tan, except where his hand had protected her.

He swallowed weakly, “You’re... Welcome.”

“No.” Gwen snapped, “No. That’d be if I thanked you. That happens when one person is grateful to another. But you’re not a person, are you? What in the goddamn...”

She trailed off, obviously having no words to describe what she’d seen.

He shrugged, smiling weakly, tiredly. “I told you. I don’t... Know what... I am.”

“No shit.” She swore, and then winced, “Well... I guess. Thanks. If you are a person.”

He sat up on his elbows weakly, looking at the ruins of the building. There was practically nothing left. Nothing left of the town either. Just a handful of smouldering ruins. A few houses away lay a giant rock, aflame. Black smoke was drifting lazily from it, but blown away by the wind.

He collapsed backwards, looking at the flames in the sky. More burning rocks falling. So it wasn’t an attack then, not by conventional weapons. It could be some sort of magical attack, but he doubted that even a Faen mage would be able to summon the power necessary to fill the entire sky with rocks falling so fast and from so far that they were catching alight.

No, he’d read something about this. “Is this... Hellflame?”

Gwen swallowed nervously, “Looks like it. So I guess I can’t tell you I’ll only sleep with you if the world was coming to an end.”

He smiled, but didn’t laugh. He wasn’t fully recovered yet. The smaller injuries took longer than the larger ones to heal. His sore throat would last for days, even if it had only taken hours for him to come back from a grilled corpselet.

He felt a foot kick him in the side and he looked up tiredly. “What?”

Gwen put a hand on her hip, “Dude. I’m still hurt. Not falling asleep yet.”

Falien rolled his eyes and stood up, almost falling over as he did. He looked at her leg and back at her, “And what do you expect me to do? I guess the medic’s place got blown to hell.”

“Wait... You don’t know magic?” She asked, looking at him in surprise.

Falien laughed, “No. I’m not magic. I’m not a god. I’m... Complicated. Killing me is harder than it looks, that’s all. Well, and the charm. And the luck.”

Gwen rolled her eyes, “You say that like it isn’t batshit.”

“What would your priestess say about all your swearing?” He laughed, and then regretted it as he saw her fight back tears. This angry face was a mask. A mask protecting someone who had just witnessed everyone they know die. He hadn’t saved her. He’d handed her the guilt of a survivor on a silver platter, and now he was twisting the knife.

Falien turned away, "I know. Sorry. It hurts to watch everyone around you die. Everyone you care about. They're gone. That emptiness will never go away."

He felt her grab one of his arms, leaning against him and holding him, "Is that why you're such a jerk? You don't dare to feel?"

"No, I'm just a jerk." He assured her, whilst trying to bury the memory of his sister screaming for help. Of his bloodied hands gripping hers. As she died, and he survived. It was better this way. Even if she knew he was being a jerk to push her away, if he held onto the idea she wouldn't sympathise with him. And if she didn't sympathise, then maybe she could hold onto who she was.

"You're an ass." She said, but kept her head leaning on his shoulder, "So... What do we do?"

"Well, you can't travel." Falien sighed, "Not with that leg. Otherwise I'd suggest making a run for Ozandia. Because there's an army a couple days out, an army that will absolutely assume this attack was targeted at them, so they'll rush forwards hunting mages."

She glared at him, "Yeah. You're a Yurk, aren't you?"

"Yep." He sighed. He'd misplaced the steel from his throat in the explosion. It was probably gone, boiled away. "They tried to kill me too. Because I refused to fight. See, I'm Prince Falien. I wasn't lying when I told you my name. Or ever. There's not much point to me lying, not with my life. My father wanted to use my gift to turn me into someone like Hero. Some sort of kingdom crushing monster. That... Sounds like too much effort to me."

He felt her pinch his arm, "Let me guess, you sleep around all day?"

"Women soldiers are... Exquisite." He said carefully, "Though they do tend to be more embarrassed than most the next morning."

"Dickwad."

He laughed softly, "You can insult me all you like. I am not about to leave you here."

"Good!" She snapped, "If you even think of leaving me whilst the sky is literally raining fire, I'll bite your dick off. Then I'll wait for it to grow back and do it again."

He groaned involuntarily at the thought. Well, the punishment side of the thought. He felt strangely at peace that she wanted him to stick around.

He sat her down on the charred ground, and rolled back the remains of her clothes, looking at her leg. Then he realised he was naked, and it was having zero effect on the woman. That wasn't something that had ever happened before. Maybe the shock of the world coming to an end was protecting her from the emotion. Maybe it was the pain. Half the nerves in her leg were exposed to the air.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" He asked, looking up at her.

Gwen nodded softly, but didn't say anything. Or do anything.

Falien glared at her, "Yeah, not psychic either. You'll have to tell me."

"Fuck." Gwen sighed, and then rolled up her top. She revealed a series of blistering burns across her stomach. The gaps where his ribs hadn't been. He smiled slowly, looking up at her, "And do the burns go higher up than that?"

She slammed her top down, "Yes, bastard."

Falien sighed heavily, brushing her cheek, "At least your beautiful face wasn't ruined."

“This beautiful face will bite you if you don’t help in a minute.”

Falien rolled his eyes, “I’m getting there. I’m a prince. I don’t exactly know how normal people live. Bandages or something, right? That’s what you need?”

“Clean cloth, clean water.” She instructed, “And hopefully some alcohol as well.”

Falien nodded and stood up, looking around at the decimated town, “I think all three of those will be a problem. Hold your breath if the wind blows this way. I don’t like the look of the smoke.”

He wandered off to look for anything that might have survived in the rubble. He doubted he would find much.

Verity

“Do you think we were getting some weird looks?” Ruth asked, lazing on the bed.

Verity shrugged non-committal. The soldier was right. The tavern drunks had definitely assumed the two of them were just using the room to screw. It seemed that kind of relationship was both common and completely taboo in Ozandius. Not that it would have been treated any better in Yurk. However, two women sharing a room wouldn’t have turned any heads.

She sat by the mirror, and pulled her shirt off, wincing as she felt the scabs that had dried to it tear off. She turned her back, looking at the mirror to see the shallow wounds. Most really were shallow. Scratches and scrapes. However, there were two wounds that weren’t that shallow. “Do you have a needle and thread?”

Ruth laughed, “Are you kidding me? You don’t in that gear bag of yours?”

“That’s... Magic stuff.” Verity sighed, “Can’t use it on myself. Doesn’t work. I didn’t have medic gear on me, we were with the main army force.”

Ruth sighed, “Right. Hey, one of those does look bad. Was that goblin crap? It might be poisoned.”

Verity held up a glass bottle, “Nothing a bit of alcohol can’t fix.”

Ruth rolled her eyes, “Yeah, no. Goblins are worse. Let me take a look.”

Verity turned around to the mirror with a sigh. She looked at herself as Ruth walked behind her. She was a soldier, first and foremost, but it seemed that lately everyone was concerned about her love life. She hadn’t found anyone worth her time to get to know. Yet, she wasn’t entirely happy with what she saw. Her face was pock-marked with scars, her hair was cut short and practical for a helmet. She had numerous scars, angry lines from badly sewn wounds and puncture points from arrows and spears dotted across her shoulders, including a particularly bad one lying directly on her collar bone. She wasn’t exactly anyone’s prize.

And she wasn’t sure why that upset her.

She’d always been okay with being a soldier. She was still okay with that after Falien had twisted her head inside out. It was what Sarin had said that had got to her. About time running out, and how mortals were uniquely blessed. It was weird. As if Sarin had been jealous, as if she believed that Verity was wasting her life for not seeking out a lover. It made Verity feel as if she’d been missing out, even if she’d never found anyone who could make her reconsider her position.

Ruth touched something, and Verity groaned loudly, “Ow. What are you doing?”

“Unfortunately, noticing that this wound is pussy. Which is really gross.” Ruth replied, “Yeah. It needs to actually be scrubbed or something. You’re not getting away with -”

“Not an option.” Verity sighed, “Even an idiot doctor will notice it’s a spear wound.”

“Yeah.” Ruth laughed, “From goblins. Can’t be that uncommon in this area. So you’re just an adventurer or something. It doesn’t wreck our cover. Whatever our cover story is.”

Verity sighed, “Women aren’t generally adventurers in this country. I was more going with the idea that the doctor will ask me to speak to him. Grunting and tossing coin fits with an adventurer. A Yurkian accent, not so much.”

Ruth rolled her eyes, “I’m sure even Yurkians -”

She never got to finish her sentence.

Verity felt her face smash into the mirror a moment before the sound of the shockwave passed through her, before the flames blinded her and took away her sense of up and down. Took away her sense of where she was.

She spat blood on the ground, staring in confusion at the dusty road, before rolling onto her back. The pain lanced through her, like she'd been kicked by a horse in the back. The tavern was... Gone. There was nothing left. Just burning fragments of wood and the bloodied corpses of patrons.

Verity gasped weakly, pushing herself upright, "Ruth? Ruth?"

She looked around frantically, and spied the hand of the soldier nearby. She grabbed it in a solid grip and pulled. She fell on her ass, staring in horror at what she'd picked up. She'd assumed Ruth had been buried beneath the fallen debris. But she hadn't. All that Verity had picked up was a dismembered arm.

She dropped it, standing up quickly and glancing around.

It didn't take much. She could see a leg over there. And a fragment of torso over there.

Ruth was gone.

Verity bit her lip, fighting herself. She'd never seen someone torn apart like that before. Somehow it was worse than watching a friend die slowly from a sword wound to the chest. This was also a future that Verity had never seen, never expected. She didn't know what was happening.

She glanced upwards, and her eyes widened, glistening as she saw it. Saw the flames cascading across the sky, falling. The sky was aflame. This was it. This was the end of the world. This was how the world always ended, in every timeline. The gods burned the sky and destroyed the humans, chargrilling the world of all life, before beginning again.

Humanity was over.

Was this her fault? Because she wasn't with the High Priestess? Could she be the one wrecking this destruction on the world? Or was it the new god that so terrified Sarin?

She swallowed nervously, and turned her attention to the burning rock that had crashed beside the tavern and blitzed it. A strange black smoke was drifting on the wind from it.

Verity turned and ran.

Shannon

“Shut up!” Shannon cried, hands over her ears as she rocked back and forth. She couldn’t actually hear the orks, but she could see them. See their shadows. It was too much. They were going to kill her. They were going to eat her. Tear her apart and pick their teeth with her shattered bones.

The fists of the creatures beat endlessly against the barrier. Shattering bone. Spreading blood across the surface. Reminding her over and over that these were not people that would give up just because they couldn’t defeat her. They would fight and continue to fight until the very last one of them was dead. They were part of what made Kru so terrifying. Part of why Shannon had cursed her own world with death. Humans were among the weakest species in all the ’verse. Orks were among the most relentless. No human army could overcome an Orkish one. The orks would fight to their last breath. The humans would fight to their last hope.

She knew time was running out. Not because she couldn’t sustain the barrier, but because the barrier would kill her. Nothing could move through it. Not even air. She was panicking, freaking out because everything was going wrong. She’d destroyed her own world, and it looked like it would be pointless. Either Kru would kill her, or the army would when she passed out and the barrier failed. Kru might even resurrect her as lich. She might never escape from this hellhole.

She’d killed Antoinette.

Sacrificed the person she’d cared about most in the entire world and it wasn’t enough. She’d failed. Failed. Shannon slammed her head backwards into the barrier, over and over. Her thoughts were stuck in a cycle, unable to grasp the immensity of what she was facing. Unable to find any shred of hope or peace. The anxiety had overwhelmed her, taking her control away.

Shannon pulled her knees up, hugging them and bursting to tears.

She’d killed Antoinette.

If ever there was someone who didn’t deserve to die, it was her. A princess on the run from an abusive family who had almost instantly adapted to being a low sister. She’d remained a low sister for a decade. She always stepped in, protecting the others. That was why she’d never managed to advance, why she’d been barely a step above Shannon herself. Because she was too kind. Because for Antoinette the rules never justified themselves. Justice was more than what could be expressed by an rulebook or overzealous worshipper.

Justice was doing what was right, even if the cost to yourself was above and beyond.

Destroying the world wasn’t justice. It was desperation. And in her desperation she had used a magic so foul, a miracle so evil, that she had damned her own soul. Damned herself forever. To forever be apart from the only person who saw her for what she was, a stupid and weak woman, and then didn’t care.

She hated herself now, more than ever.

She’d hated herself for so long. It was a way of life. She’d never had any worth, even after she began to speak with Sarin’s authority. She was still just using the authority of the goddess to do what the goddess wanted. What she wanted didn’t even come into the picture. The only selfish thing she’d allowed herself so willingly was Antoinette. Teasing her. Kissing her. Asking for Antoinette to give herself to her.

She was as useless as she’d been treated.

She wore scars all over, not because she had been raped. That had happened, but afterwards,

to remind her that she wasn't even good for that, the man had painted his mark across her. Taken anything that might one day be beauty. He'd let her know, in terms she'd understood even as a child, that she was not worth anyone's time of day. That she deserved every single thrust of his dagger. Every blow of his fists.

Shannon wished now, like most nights, that she had died there. Lying on her side in that alley, crying and bleeding.

If she had, then maybe Sarin would have chosen someone who wouldn't have failed so completely. Someone who wouldn't have been so stupid as to pick a fight with a goddess who wasn't bound by a single treaty.

If she had, then maybe Antoinette and Mytris and Eri and Rin would still be alive.

If Shannon had died, then maybe the world would have had a chance.

All she could do now was delay the inevitable. Inflict the maximum damage against the world that Kru would take. Make it harder for her. Make the survivors harder to find, harder to destroy.

She didn't remember much of what the man had done to her. Those memories had vanished like smoke, and her mind rebelled at the idea of even trying to recall them. But she did remember lying there. She remembered every detail of that alleyway floor. Every detail of his mocking face. She remembered the blood spreading out slowly, a pool of it. Remembered the sticky feeling as it washed by the side of her face. Remembered the sickly smell of sex and copper.

She remembered the man gasping as a knife slammed into his throat, knocking him aside.

Remembered Mytris grabbing her head, his young face full of concern and terror. Too afraid of what had happened to her to realise he had just attempted to kill a visiting state official. Too kind to realise the magnitude of the crime he'd committed.

Too sweet to realise that Shannon didn't want to be saved.

It was a quick end for a bloody life.

She'd chosen to die there.

Then the man had knocked Mytris against the wall. He'd began carving a symbol into his chest, like he had to her. Leaving his damned mark. Mytris was too young and too weak to do anything about it. All he could do was scream as the man disfigured a kinder soul than his own.

So Shannon had done the only thing she could.

She cursed him. Cursed him never to die. To feel nothing. To always be denied his pleasure. She cursed the son-of-a-bitch to live forever in his regret of the moment he dared to attack a street boy who was just trying to save a dying girl.

She wished Mytris was here to save her now.

Wished that she could still make curses. She'd lost all of that. When she'd sworn her life to Sarin, trying to forget what had happened to her, she'd given up all allegiance to the other powers in the 'verse. She had never been a witch, she had no magic of her own. She'd been a theurgist. A medium who spoke to the gods and demigods. Someone who made deals with the dead and the not quite alive. She'd signed every contract without a thought.

What point was her life?

Maybe that was why Sarin had chosen her. Because Shannon had made deals in the past, when she was a stupid child. When getting a loaf of bread from a force of death was better than going the

ninth day without food at all. When letting a god abuse her tiny form just made her cry silently, and didn't turn her into a useless wreck.

No one was coming for her.

Her soul was as bleak and damned as it had ever been. She was as useless as she had been told at every turn.

Death was nothing more than what she deserved.

Antoinette

She'd stopped crying. Crying only worked when you still had something to cry about. When you hadn't accepted what was happening to you. She was going to die. Today, tomorrow. Even if she somehow managed to survive the poisoning, she was still going to die. She was the one person Yurk had to eliminate. She wasn't the bargaining chip that King Iza thought she was. He might kill her, or hand her over for execution. Either way, the powers that be were going to make sure she died.

The temple of Sarin was gone. Not just the building. There were no sisters after this. No coming back from it. The whole city was in flames and smoke. Ozandia was a thing of the past. The entire city was lost. Whoever had attacked them had already won. The King and some of his knights would survive. They'd probably retreat somewhere they could strike back from, but the nation was dead. It just hadn't realised it yet.

Once the other cities heard, the infighting would start. The loss of control over the seething populace. Rebellion would spread like the smoke. Killing indiscriminately, like the smoke. Bandits would move into the open, no longer afraid. People like her, idiots just trying to stay alive, would be slaughtered for materials that were worthless. Precious stones and metals would be traded with the other nations, but in the end food and water would become the currency.

She'd seen it before. When Yurk fell.

So many people she'd thought were good and strong had become nothing less than brigands to survive. Murdering anybody just to find that next scrap. To stay alive, people were willing to do whatever it took. Morality wasn't worth holding onto when you weren't sure if you'd see another sunrise. They might be an innocent passerby, but they held the key to you living another day. So they paid the price. A price you were always more than willing to hand out.

She'd seen the temple as a place she could repent. To try and repay every sin she had committed for the lie that the world needed her to survive.

Antoinette's head jerked up as she heard sounds, and she looked in surprise at the soot covered soldiers. Gone were the shining breastplates of the palace guard. The arrogant and cruel faces. They were replaced with men who had seen death. Who had finally come to understand that some things can't be controlled. Not everything has an answer. You can't fight the world. Sometimes... All you can do is curl up and die.

One of the guards noticed her, and moved over, drawing his sword, "You were a Sister of Sarin, were you not?"

"I was." Antoinette sighed, "I was also Princess Ariadne."

Her bet paid off. He sheathed his sword, crouching in front of her, "Why did the Sisters do this?"

"We didn't." Antoinette growled, "I was the one in charge of the temple. Do you think I shelled myself with a poisonous rock?"

The guard sighed, dragging her upright.

Antoinette's eyes rolled back into her head and she let out an ear-piercing scream at the pain. The guard didn't even react, dragging her behind him.

Falien

He took a swig of the bottle, sitting on the charred barrel and looking over the ruins of the town. There really wasn't much that had survived. He'd only seen one other survivor, the man now lying by his feet, jerking as the blood poured out of the incision in his neck. Just another drunk. Just another idiot who was too dumb to realise that the gods had decided to end this world. Falien had done him a kindness, killing him before the desolate landscape did.

He sighed and stood up, holding the half-drunk bottle in one hand. Thank goodness for cellars. He ripped the shirt off the dying man, and then turned and began making his way through the ash again. He held the shirt to his mouth, breathing through it as he made his way towards his new toy. He really was glad that she had survived, even if it had only been in a state that required his aid and attention.

It felt so personal the way she had been scarred. He hadn't even had to mark her as his own, or ask her to. His rib-lines had been burned into her flesh. It was almost as if the gods were looking down on him and approving her. She would be his, and she would complain, and he would adore it.

That was it.

That was why he liked her so much. Because she made him feel good. She made his activities more than just bad habits accumulated over a lifetime. She brought back that taste. She made him feel just like he did when he'd scarred that little brat on his first trip to Ozandia. When he'd substituted his desire of the green-eyed sister for the girl who tried to pick his pocket.

He wondered briefly if that girl still remembered the lesson he had taught her. If she still bore his symbol on her chest, marking her as forever his.

He waved happily at the disabled girl lying in the ruins as he came into view. She was looking worried, and weak. He hoped she wasn't craving him. That would be a disappointment. He wanted her to fight him.

He sat down next to her, passing her the bottle, "Alcohol, as requested."

She glared at him, "And a blood-stained tunic is what you call clean cloth? Also... What the fuck... It's wet."

"Mostly mine." Falien falsely assured her, "I met a survivor. He wasn't happy about it."

It was the first lie he'd told in a long time. To his own ears, it sounded unconvincing. Not that it mattered. It wasn't like she could run from him. All she could do was hate him, and that was exactly what he wanted.

Gwen glared at him, and then sighed, "Fine. Help me bandage this thing."

Falien smiled, laughing, "Fine. And then what? You still can't travel."

"Do it." She snapped.

He shrugged, and poured the liquid down her burned leg. She let out a scream, and he felt his chest purring along with her. He took a cleaner corner of the shirt and tore it free, wrapping it around her leg. He delicately placed it, and then tightened it. She screamed again.

His hands shook briefly as he raised the edge of her top.

Gwen grabbed them, "What do you think you're doing?"

"We need to disinfect the rest of the burns, don't we?" He asked, his face blank.

She sighed painfully, "I can do that."

"Not if you're going to scream again." He sighed, "I can get it over and done with before you know it. I'll be gentle, I promise."

"I've heard that before." She sneered, but let go.

He didn't violate the trust she was expressing. He didn't need to. He'd had her once already. He wanted more than that. He wanted her to ask him. For her to take the initiative. Otherwise it wouldn't be new.

He was patient, he could wait.

Verity

She paused, breathing heavily and banged on the door to the fort that sat at the edge of the bridge.

A guard cracked it open, "What in the fuck do you want?"

Verity laughed, "The bridge? Crossing?"

The man tossed open the door, laughing. He went and sat down, still laughing.

Verity winced and walked into the fort, passed the stairs, and looked at the bridge in front of her. There was a gaping hole in the middle she hadn't been able to see until she got this close. One of the flaming rocks had smashed straight through it. She tried to size up the gap carefully and the guard spoke, "You can't be serious. Jumping that is suicide. I doubt the other side is letting anyone through. Not with this buttfuck happening."

"I need to get to Ozandia." Verity growled angrily, feeling her accent thicken, "I'm needed at the damn temple."

The guard glared at her, "That'd be a Yurkian accent. Do you need to assassinate someone?"

She rolled her eyes, "I'm supposed to be helping the Sisters of Sarin. Supposed to be preventing shit like this."

The man paused, leaning forward, "Wait... Do you think you can stop this?"

"It's possible." Verity sighed heavily, "The High Priestess should be able to, if someone were to tell her how."

The guard stood up slowly, "We did try patching the gap, when it first happened. Another one of those things took it out immediately. Like a curse."

That made sense. This was the curse that was supposed to end the world. Population centres, transport hubs, and much needed crossings like these would be likely targets to maximise the damage caused. But that meant the curse was magical in nature. And if it was, then she could shield the gap. Temporarily, anyway.

However, Ozandians were well known for their hatred of any kind of magic. It was likely if the guard suspected she had magic he'd kill her, rather than help her.

"I might be able to help." Verity said slowly, "I am on a mission of Sarin. Prayers do sometimes work."

The guard laughed, "You think the gods fucking care? The sky is on fire, woman!"

"I know!" Verity shouted, "My friend just got ripped limb from limb by one of those bastards. I know, alright. But the mission comes first. I might be able to stop this crap. So I have to try."

He shrugged. "The others have left. A couple jumped. I can try and push a beam across for you, if you can try and protect me. How are you going to do it? Just pray?"

Verity fished her last surviving trick out of her pocket. It was a copper ring, made of braided strands. She held it up, "I'll make a sacrifice. It should at least get the attention of the goddess. Hopefully."

The guard rolled his eyes. "Let's try it."

She sprinted down the length of the bridge, feeling it shaking with the nearby impacts of stone in the mountain sides. She could see the explosions from here. The rockfalls weren't stopping. The

flames still burst out here and there. They would scour the countryside, wiping everything out. It wouldn't be long.

Before the god could see, Verity tossed the ring in front of her, halfway over the gap, and uttered a phrase quickly. This was proper magic, something she wasn't particularly skilled in. It was an Elfin spell of protection. A sphere of light sprang into existence. Hopefully the man was unfamiliar enough with magic he'd assume that the light was from Sarin.

The man grunted, shoving a plank across the dozen-stride gap. "Hurry!"

She stepped onto it, flinching as she looked down and noticed the incredible fall down to the river Oz. She might even be dead before she hit the water. She swallowed and focused on balancing, and the board beneath her feet. She crossed it slowly, inching as she held the sphere around her. Hoping that the protection spell would be able to survive a strike from one of the burning rocks.

Halfway over she felt the board suddenly flip, and she spun in the air, snagging it just before she hit the ground. She glared up, and saw the guard standing there. He spat at her, "Witch. You think I don't know a spell from a miracle?"

Verity braced her shoulders, rocking back and forth for a moment before she swung herself into the air. She felt her heart race as she moved, hoping she was right about the effort required.

She landed on the edge of the sideways board, and glared at him, "Infernum."

The guard screamed as his shirt burst into flames, and Verity winced as she felt one of her fingers curl up, equally as burned. She turned and leaped the last two steps across the board. She landed softly on the bridge as something rocketed through behind her, shattering the protection spell instantly and turning the board into a spray of sawdust.

She sighed, and sprinted toward the other fort. Hoping that someone there would be more reasonable than this idiot had been.

Guinevere

He was a piece of shit.

She knew it. She'd known it even before she slept with him. She just didn't know how to resist. If he asked her, she would do anything. Even now when she was seething with rage. When she knew what had happened.

The only reason he'd saved her was to make her his plaything. A toy. Something to be manipulated and pushed. He saved her because he still wanted something from her. Just like he'd murdered someone to get what he wanted. A shirt.

Right now, he was right. She couldn't survive on her own, not in this state. She needed a healer, and until she got one she was stuck with this monster. She wondered how many people he had killed. He said his army had tried to kill him, and that's why he'd left the Yurkian forces. She didn't doubt it. In better circumstances she'd kill him herself, even if it broke every bow she'd made to Sarin.

The world would be immensely better off if he just died.

How many others? He found it so easy to make the people around him do what he wanted. How many lives had he ruined? Women convinced to leave husband and child behind for a single night of joy. He smiled sweetly, as he took away everything of worth. Everything that meant you should keep living. He smiled and laughed and everyone just bowed down and bent over for him.

She wouldn't let it happen to her, not again.

For now though, she needed him. He was right. They needed to leave the city. There was only one way to go, with Yurk at the border. Towards Ozandia. They wouldn't be the only refugees heading there. The capital would be the best defended, the best protected. They had what it took to put out the fires, and to fight back against whatever had turned the sky to flames.

To get there, she needed some kind of transport. She had to depend on him, and he could suddenly decide to take her back to Yurk as a prize. Maybe he really was the prince. She was probably already his prize.

"Ozandia... Or the Yurkian forces."

He smiled over at her, making her feel sick, "You're considering Yurk?"

"They're closer." She shrugged in frustration, "With this shit coming out of the sky... Maybe the war doesn't matter as much."

"They'll assume Ozandia summoned it." He yawned, "No. Not that way. Ozandia? So how do we get you there? You can't even walk."

"So you'll have to pull me."

Falien raised an eyebrow, "A cart? Have you noticed the town? Everything was incinerated. I couldn't even build one."

"You could pull a sled." She shrugged, and tapped her fist on the charred floor, "Some of this is intact enough."

"It'll hurt." He sighed, as if that was enough to reject her suggestion.

Guinevere glared, "I'm fine with that. You probably want to find some rope or something for it."

He held up the rest of torn tunic, “Got it handled. Guess you want me to tear up the floor?”

She glared at him, knowing he wasn’t feeling the unadulterated hatred flowing out of her, “Get to work.”

“In a minute.” He yawned, lying down, “I feel like a nap.”

She considered killing him. Again.

Shannon

She wasn't breathing well. She was feeling tired. Her eyes were closing on their own and she felt like she couldn't get enough air. It was true. She wasn't. There wasn't a lot of air left. She was slowly drowning as the orks continued to batter themselves against her prison. Continued to kill themselves to try and get at her, just because their goddess asked them to.

There was a way out of this.

He'd given her his name. Yet, she'd betrayed him so much already. She'd destroyed the entire world, when all he required was that she remain at peace.

If she called him, if she summoned him like she had summoned so many others, then she would be forcing him to fight. To fight and kill. To betray the oaths that he had sworn to live by.

The power of a dragon might, just might, be enough to get her out of this alive, to preserve their chance against Kru. Give her time to fix the miracle in place. And then he could execute her for her crimes, or whatever he deemed fit.

Just like when she'd called it.

She was being forced to betray her values, just to save the world.

She didn't matter. Even he didn't matter.

There was no choice. Kru could not be allowed to gain a foothold. The Fel could not be allowed to infect her world. It had to be contained to Eldrasa, here and now. It would take the power of a god to cut Eldrasa off from the other realms, and it was power that Shannon simply didn't have available to her. Power that Sarin didn't have to spare. Power that Kru could oppose and cancel out.

She clenched a fist weakly, barely managing to curl her hand into the right shape. "Nidoghr."

A roar of flames exploded next to her. Flickering in every colour that could light up the sky. The colours flowed out, spinning and twisting. The tongues interwove together and took shape. The beastly man emerged from the flame, patting them out gently.

Shannon smiled weakly and felt her eyes begin to close.

A firm grip grabbed her by the throat, lifting her up as her body went limp. A voice full of rage spoke, "You call me? After what you have done?"

She didn't blame him. She had no defence. She'd destroyed everything. She deserved everything. Every insult, every attack. Every memory that history would have of her. The destroyer of worlds. The cursed maiden of utter defeat.

"Why?!" He demanded, shaking her awake.

She looked at him sadly, and uttered one word hoarsely, "Fel."

The wyrm looked around him, at the orks relentlessly beating on the now flickering yellow walls of the barrier, and out at the burned out ground. Burned out everywhere but beneath their feet, where she had healed it.

"It didn't have to be this way." He said with distress, "You could have stopped the Fel without destroying your world. Murdering millions of people."

"How?" Shannon asked, barely functioning.

The wyrm's shoulders collapsed, "I don't know... There had to be a way..."

“She’s a goddess.” Shannon whispered, slipping to the ground as he released her. Her head touched down to the ground with a thunk, “A new goddess. No treaty.”

The wyrm fell to his knees, his maned head bowed, and he wept. “Do you know how many you have killed?”

She couldn’t answer him. She couldn’t breathe anymore. She was gasping silently. Weakly.

Pathetically.

A fitting way to go for a failure like her.

Her eyes closed.

Sound erupted in the distance as the barrier vanished. As she exposed a man of peace to the bitterness of war. To the angry hoard of orks, begging to be allowed to destroy someone, anyone. Desperate for their chance at glory.

Shannon felt to the ground.

She blinked, rubbing her head and sitting up. How could she fall when she’d already been on the ground?

Except she wasn’t.

She wasn’t surrounded by grass and desert anymore. No more charging orks. No more blood and piss. The place she was in was indistinct. Things had shape. Enough that she could guess she was in a house, a home, but little more than that. Everything seemed out of focus, but it wasn’t her. If she moved her head it adapted. It wasn’t her eyes. The place really was blurry, as if it was the nature of it.

“What in the world are you doing here?”

She looked over tiredly, and saw something sitting on a couch. Or she assumed it was a couch. She also assumed it was what had spoken to her. She couldn’t make out either of them clearly, but they had the right general shape of things.

She sighed heavily, and frowned, “I think... I think I’m dying. Where am I?”

“An in-between place.” The voice answered, calmer and kinder. “This place is... It represents a choice you have to make. You don’t have to die. You could go back. Make up for what you’ve done. Or you come here. There won’t be any rest. Your crimes are... Beyond any scale I have ever known.”

Shannon smiled sadly, “I’m hellbound. I always was. It doesn’t matter what I do. I can’t make up for what I’ve done.”

“There is a way.”

She looked at the shadow in surprise, “What? What the fuck could make up for killing everyone!? For murdering Antoinette and Mytris and every single fucking human? Some might survive. Not enough for it to matter a damn for the next five hundred years. I cannot fix it. Hell will have to invent new ways to torture my soul, because there is no goddamn fucking measure to my motherfucking crimes!”

Shannon paused, out of breath, and blushed. That outburst had been coming a while.

“You’re not the first, actually.”

Shannon blinked in surprise, rubbing her tired eyes. Staring at the shadows and blurs was

taking a toll. “What do you mean?”

“Someone else wrecked the world before you.” He laughed, “It’s why you exist. Why all of humanity exists.”

Shannon frowned, “The old world really existed?”

“Wintralassa.” The man said softly, speaking the same name the wyrm had. “She was one of the First People. The Protoanimarum. Humanity, elfin, orks... They’re all attempts to recreate her kind. A people that were wiped from existence after they waged a war against the gods, and nearly won. Reality itself was shattered. When it got stitched back together... There are regions of the world where you can enter another. Where you can fall through the cracks and into the Void. Places where physical laws cease to matter and magic runs haywire. Those are the consequences of her actions.”

Shannon sighed heavily. “She stole magic from the gods. I used magic entrusted to me to kill everyone I was supposed to protect.”

“Antoinette isn’t dead.” The voice stated.

Shannon felt her heart soar, and then get crushed. How could she explain herself to the woman? She’d already had an excuse to hate her. And now she’d literally burned the world down around her.

“Rin is alive.” He sighed, “People are surviving. They won’t, however, without your help.”

“I have to stop Kru!” Shannon snapped, “There’s no way to do it. If Kru wants our world, she’ll have it. I have to stop her. The only way is to take away her desire to have the world. I thought maybe I could heal her of the Fel. She saw it, and ran. I didn’t have a way to chase her down, and I still don’t. Even if I managed to catch up with her, I don’t think healing her would do anything but send her over the edge into the oblivion of her fucking madness. She truly believes in the Fel. That the best thing for the whole ‘verse is to get gobbled up by a virus that makes you obsess over spreading it further.”

“I can’t give you all the answers. I don’t have them.” The man answered, “But I don’t think you can just sit there and let everyone else suffer for your crimes. Don’t you think they deserve better than that? They’re paying. Right now. You’re not. You’re drifting off to sleep as a wyrm abandons three thousand years of devotion to peace to protect your bloody corpse.”

Shannon clenched her jaw shut, trying not to cry. “I can’t help him. I can’t help anyone. I’m a failure. The only thing I know how to do is make things worse.”

The figure stood up, swimming more into focus, revealing a black suit. He spoke angrily, “Mytris died because of you, Shannon. He was killed saving Antoinette from the fires. Poisoned as he went back in to save another sister. Because you shelled them with hellflame. Because you thought you knew better than everyone. I’ll tell you straight up, right now. None of the timelines saw you pulling this crap. No one thought you were stupid enough to bring about the end of the world. It was not the right answer. You are right. You failed. Now own your mistake, and save your sisters from your own goddamn mess.”

She felt like her heart had stopped. Every word had slammed shame and fear into her.

Mytris was dead. She’d killed the man who had saved her life. A man who had loved her. Who had always been there for her. He’d sacrificed himself to save the person she loved.

All of this... Wasn’t worth the cost.

She’d actually screwed up.

There was no bigger fuck up than this. Even Wintralassa, who had reality destroyed by her actions had achieved something. The treaties between the gods. This wasn't like that. Shannon had killed an entire world, and it wasn't the answer. The god of death was telling her it wasn't the answer.

She didn't have a choice.

She had to stay here. Had to stay as far away from the living as possible. She couldn't go back to them. Couldn't tell them they were suffering because of her.

The man shook his head in disappointment and turned, vanishing into the air. "Thirty nine million, seven hundred and eighty three thousand, two hundred and three souls lost. Because of you."

Shannon fell to her knees, feeling weak.

She vomited.

She'd killed millions of people. Destroyed cities and families. She'd lit the skies on fire... And she was wrong.

"Get up."

She looked over her shoulder, and burst into terrified tears, "No. Not you. Please."

His blue eyes were dark with anger. The anger of a war god. The anger of a boy who had become a man before he'd even learned to walk. A man who stood at the edge of things, watching them fall apart. Piece by piece.

He held out a hand, "It's time to get up, Shannon."

She looked at the ground, biting her lip and squeezing her fists into her knees, "I can't do this. I can't."

"Since when has that ever stopped you?"

"This is different." She wept, "I killed you. I killed you, Mytris. I can't fix that. I can't turn back the clock."

He put a gentle but firm hand on her shoulder, "Antoinette is going to die without you. Rin will. Heck, even the freak trying to help you will. There's no way out for anyone without you. You changed the future, Shannon. You shouldn't have been able to do that. You wouldn't have if you weren't the most important piece of all this."

Shannon cringed, "Important? I guess the literal murderer of all of humanity is important. Doesn't mean it's good."

"Oh stop with the bloody pity party!" Mytris snapped, dragging her to her feet, "Why do you think this is your choice to make? I could toss you to hell right now. I'd probably be rewarded for it. But that doesn't fix anything, girl. So you know what, I'm going to curse you."

Shannon looked at him, unable to speak. Too afraid to do anything.

"I curse you to fix this." Mytris growled, and then he slapped her. Hard. She went sprawling to the ground as he spoke, "I curse you to live."

The grass hit her face.

Antoinette

The chains holding her hands above her head rattled as she looked up. This was a dungeon. Intimidating to newcomers, because of all the cages and sharp object lying around. Because the guards never said a word, and just hit you until you worked out what they want. She'd seen the inside of dungeons before. This one was relatively pleasant compared to some of the others. Pulling up on the chains to breathe didn't dig steel spikes into her back.

The gate in front of her was being unlocked. That was what had caught her attention. Pulled her out of the pits of her depression. Everyone else was dead. The temple had been completely wiped out. First by flame, and then by the bastards who should have come to help them. They killed them. Every last one.

The king walked in front of her slowly, "Well. I thought I said she wasn't to be damaged?"

The guard behind him spoke gruffly, "She was a hundred paces from where a rock came down. The damage was not avoidable, m'lord."

The king waved a hand, dismissing the man. The gate was locked behind him, whilst the king stared at her face intently. Not saying a word. Just examining her. She wasn't sure of his intention. He might be about to use her. He might be about to torture her. He might just be trying to intimidate her. Waiting for her to look away. To give him something to scream and shout about.

Antoinette glared back at him, eyes unwavering.

"So this is the famous Ariadne." The king began, smiling slowly, "Tane's offered me peace and ten thousand troops, if I hand him your head and nothing else."

Antoinette rolled her eyes, "Sounds like him."

"The king wants you alive, and undamaged." Iza continued, "That one might be a bit more flexible, with the skies literally on fire. It might not. He's a hard one to predict."

"Not really." Antoinette replied, "This is about his son. That's all the skirmishes with Ocandius were ever about."

Iza paused, "His son?"

"Prince Falien." Antoinette indicated and then sighed, "Wait. You don't know what happened to Falien here?"

The king shrugged, "The name has never come up before."

"He was cursed." Antoinette laughed, "Cursed to never die, and never be able to experience happiness again. He was cursed when his family visited this city. Well, hunting me. About ten years ago? I was pretending to be a sister at the time. The temple hadn't accepted me yet, but I could blend in well enough. It saved me. Apparently Falien tried to rape some street brat. Unfortunately, they were a theurgist. A god summoner."

Iza screwed up his face in disgust. "Magic. It always comes back to magic. Do you know what happened to the brat?"

"They're your streets." Antoinette replied, "Shouldn't you know?"

Iza smiled grimly, "Probably dead. Or untouchable. So the king is after revenge."

"No." Antoinette rolled her eyes, "He wants the curse broken. Which means he'll want a census of Ozandius. He'll measure magical aptitudes, investigate religious rites, etc. Searching for any theurgist who could do the job."

The king nodded slowly, “And why are you telling me this for free? I wouldn’t mind donating you to Tane.”

“Vizier Tane has no intention of fulfilling his side of that bargain.” Antoinette smiled, “You know that, and so do I. If you told Tane I’m alive, he’s already dispatched several units to kill me. If I die in your custody, and the king of Yurk finds out. . . That’ll go badly for you. So that is exactly what Tane will do. Distract the king from himself, and eliminate a potential threat in you. The sky burning is just an opportunity to the Vizier. Not an invitation for hesitation.”

Iza smiled broadly, “Your years as a sister haven’t dulled your knowledge of the court. That’s good. I could use you.”

“Go to hell.” Antoinette snapped, “You killed my sisters. We were trying to help you. I was forming the damn inquisitor squad for you. Why did you attack?”

Iza frowned, “I didn’t.”

“The palace guards marched on the temple!” Antoinette yelled, “Three columns! Have you forgot that already?”

“I never sent them.” Iza sighed, smiling at her.

Understanding began to dawn on her and her face fell. “No.”

Iza shrugged, “He’s been by my side for so long.”

The butler. The one who interrogated Shannon. He’d spent hours talking to her about state secrets. Because he was the power behind the throne. Iza and he shared the power. Neither had enough to remove the other. Iza wasn’t in complete control here. He was every bit a prisoner in the palace as she was, even if his rooms were adorned with silk.

She sighed, glaring at him. “And the guards who fetched me? Did they have to kill everyone?”

“They didn’t.” Iza replied, “There was a. . . Quota. That was the agreement.”

Antoinette winced, “Why is he afraid of the temple?”

“Magic.” Iza sighed heavily, “There’s a prophecy or some such bullshit. Unfortunately, it looks like it might not be complete bullshit. A goddess appoints a handmaiden. The handmaiden brings death and destruction. The skies burn. The handmaiden returns and kills the king. It’s a tapestry. Vague imagery. Heck, it even features an army of orks behind the handmaiden. Tyran believes that your High Priestess is the handmaiden. At this point, I don’t think anyone can convince him otherwise.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, “So what if she is? She might be the one appointed to fight all the crap in the tapestry.”

Iza shrugged, “It’s all just magic. Who gives a damn.”

“The girl chained in your dungeon trying to figure out when she’s going to die.” Antoinette growled, and the king laughed at her, “I can tell you that. Tomorrow, sundown. It has been scheduled. You’ll be the scapegoat for this crisis.”

She sighed heavily, “Thanks for the honesty.”

Iza shrugged, “It is a shame. You’re not half bad-looking for a Sister. Marrying you would have been an option in a more peaceful world.”

She spat on the ground, “Sorry dude, you look like a freaking donkey’s ass.”

His fist slammed into her gut, slamming her into the brick wall.

He turned, and the guard unlocked the gate.

She wheezed weakly, held up only by the chains, “Tane’s coming for me. Don’t get in his way.”

Iza waved a hand as he left.

She pulled herself upright, and leaned her head tiredly against one of her arms. Being chained up like this was a torture. It meant little at first. Then your arms tired, and your shoulders began to burn. No matter how you moved, there was no relief. Then you began to realise you couldn’t breathe properly. That you had to pull yourself up to get a decent gasp of air. Eventually your own exhaustion killed you. It would take days. Most prisoners never saw death from it. It was just a punishment device. A way of ensuring you knew who was in control.

Antoinette pulled herself up on one arm, grabbing a small object nestled into her hair. She held up the handcuff key and dropped it into her mouth. She moved it around and used her teeth to unlock her right wrist. The other followed more easily. She tucked the key back into her hair, thanking the stars for the bad habits she’d picked up as a child.

She walked up the gate and knocked on it. She heard the guard coming slowly. He looked at her through the bars in confusion at first, and then he shouted the alarm and went to unlock the gate. She grabbed him and slammed him against the bars as soon as the key was in. He toppled backwards to the ground as she unlocked and opened the gate. She stepped forward as he held his head and started to stand. Her foot slammed into the side of his skull and he hit the ground.

She pulled his dagger from its sheath, and began walking down the hallway quietly. She paused as she got to the next cell. She looked at the dozen or so prisoners lying there, in their own waste and filth. Left to rot and die. She unlocked the gate and tossed the keys at one of the more awake prisoners. He caught them, and she saw the anger that was igniting there. All she needed to do was give them a push.

Antoinette smiled slowly, “Let me tell you about a boy named Red.”

Several of the prisoners jerked to attention and Antoinette smiled, “Once upon a time, a man stood up. Once upon a time, a man got dead. Seems the king came and took his head. Seems the king forgot the boy’s name. Forgot what he stood for. So the boy came back. And the boy stabbed him. The boy bled him dry. Because the boy was dead.”

She turned and walked away. It would either work or it wouldn’t. She hadn’t practised her public speaking in years. She was hoping she’d struck a chord, that she’d given them a goal. Because she needed them to make a noise if she was going to get out of this one. She was in the palace dungeons, and the alarm had been sounded. She might be able to take one person by surprise, but she wasn’t particularly skilled. She’d learned to fight a decade ago, and hadn’t needed it since.

Antoinette peeked around the corner and pulled back. She plastered herself against the wall, controlling her breathing. The king was talking to the jailer, and a half dozen guards were lazing around. Playing cards, polishing their armour. Apparently this was the direction you went if you wanted to die.

She breathed steadily, readying the dagger she’d stolen.

A noise suddenly burst into existence. It pulled in on itself, like a roar in reverse, and then it suddenly whipped forward turning into an explosion. Antoinette hit the ground, her head ringing. She looked up at the dust floating in the air and the enormous hole carved in the wall in front of her, blinking. Not understanding yet.

A man strode through, and turned to look down the hallway where the guards were no doubt scrambling.

He screamed towards them, hands clenching into fists. Antoinette screamed and shuffled backwards against the wall as flames billowed out of his mouth. The heat made even the floor beneath her hot to the touch as the wall of destruction shot outwards, and down the hall.

He coughed as the flames vanished, rubbing his throat. He turned to her, fixing eyes that were yellow and orange on her. "Are you the one known as Antoinette?"

She flinched, not knowing what to do. This was magic. Not just magic. This was destruction magic on a scale she'd never witnessed. Not even when viewing the Yurkian army as a child. This creature, whatever he was, could destroy anything that he wanted to. And he wanted her?

"Are you Antoinette?" He growled again, his deep voice resonating against the stones and rattling the rubble.

She swallowed nervously, "Yes. Am I going to regret telling you?"

"I was sent by Shannon." He stated, and helped her stand up, "She wishes to speak with you."

Antoinette looked him up and down. If anyone was going to find a mythic warrior of incredible power out of the blue, it would be Shannon. The whole world seemed to be revolving around her right now.

She frowned, "Okay."

He took one of her hands and the world seemed to move passed her in a blur, as if she was flying through it.

They stopped, and she fell forwards, emptying what was left in her stomach.

The man turned and seemed to instantly vanish again.

Antoinette breathed heavily, shaking. She wasn't sure how or what had happened. She was standing on a hill, when a moment ago she was helping to engineer a jailbreak. The hill was covered in ice and snow. Nearby a fire was burning, and a figure was slumped in front of it. Tired and beaten.

She walked over the snow slowly, acutely aware of every cut and bruise. Every torn muscle. The cold was exacerbating her injuries. Injuries that she'd already made worse in her efforts to escape her own execution.

"Shannon?"

The figure turned to her. It looked like Shannon. Except the eyes. Those grey weren't full of anger or mischief. There was no happiness there. They were dead. The eyes of someone who couldn't care. Someone who had seen horror upon horror. The eyes of a warrior, a killer.

Falien

It was irritating work, pulling the sled.

This was menial work. The work of a slave. Except this stupid country that was burning in every direction didn't have slaves. So far, it didn't have survivors. They'd seen one or two on the road. Corpses. Black blood and vomit from their mouths and noses. The smoke was poisonous, like he'd guessed.

The sky was still on fire. Still falling. Rocks burning were cascading out of the sky. The ground was shaking every time one struck. There was still every chance of one striking near them again, undoing all his work. How much longer could it keep going? An entire day had passed. A day of hellflame. The destruction across the world must be intense. He was not sure he had the imagination to comprehend all ten human kingdoms burning to the ground, with no one to blame.

They would all find their scapegoats. Their sacrifices.

Yet, whoever had done this was beyond powerful. The magic required to do something at this scale was nothing short of divine. This was the work of the gods. The gods who hadn't dared to interfere with humanity for longer than they'd kept records. There were myths of war against the gods, once. Was this when their anger poured out and they finally took revenge? He wouldn't put it past the petty creatures so many worshipped.

He wasn't sure what a god was. They were powerful, and had realms of their own. But they could also die. They could fall in love. Maybe all that made a god was the power to make decisions, rather than let the world make them for you. Maybe it just meant be as strong as the strongest.

He didn't much care, either.

He just didn't want to lose this woman, not after he'd put so much effort into protecting her so far. He was doing the work of a slave. Just so he could hear her bitter insults turn to honey in his ears. He had no idea why he enjoyed her hatred so much. The curse was supposed to stop him enjoying anything at all. To take all enjoyment from him.

Like this world ending disaster.

The curse couldn't have destroyed the skies. The girl had been powerful, but not enough to summon a god to do her bidding. The curse was something less. A spirit, powerful enough to ruin all of his days, but not without limits. Maybe the spirit had finally exhausted itself after pursuing him for so long. Finally tired or had the contract completed.

The girl seemed to think that Ozandia could provide refuge.

If this was the work of the gods, then Ozandia had been instantly wiped from the face of the world. It would have been one of their targets. Rocks fell from the sky. Too many were hitting settlements for it to be random. They were being directed towards the populations centres. To wipe out humanity, or at least to scatter them.

Ozandia might be able to survive if they got through the first wave. If they dropped their ridiculous hatred of magic and put up a barrier. Otherwise they wouldn't. This whole trip might be wasted.

The best solution would be to find someone capable of sending them both to another world, another realm. He didn't know for certain if the other realms existed, but if he did, then it seemed at least somewhat likely.

He paused, and gestured down the hill, "And there it is."

Gwen spat angrily, "Then get moving."

Falien crouched, watching the distant architecture, and sighed, "No."

Gwen limped over next to him, "What the... Oh."

The bridge was actually intact. It stretched across the giant chasm that lead down to the river Oz, containing a drop so high you might have died before you struck the water. Without it, getting over would require an extra week of travel. In a world where rocks fell out of the sky and destroyed everything nearby.

Gwen sighed, "I don't recognise the flag. Who seized control?"

The fortress on this side of the bridge no longer flew the Ozandian flag. The other side did, however. There was a fight to control this passage through the kingdom. It was a vital strategic location, but getting the woman over it wouldn't be possible in her current condition.

However, one of the sides probably did have a medic.

"I don't know it." Falien sighed. It was unusual for him not to know a flag. However, the flag really wasn't one he'd seen. It was simplistic. A stylised 'K' on a black background. Nothing more. Probably related to the lord of whoever the hell had sent them.

Falien frowned, "It has to be an Ozandian noble. With Yurk charging the border, no one else could invade."

"The king killed most of the nobles last year." Gwen laughed, "I don't think there's any left to pull off something like this. I guess you just need to go down there and ask them who they are, and if we can cross."

Falien looked over at her, "Say what?"

"Get your fat, useless ass down the hill." Gwen snapped.

He shivered.

Verity

She punched the man in the face for the fifth time, and then dropped him as he finally slumped. She shook her fist painfully. He had been too stubborn to fall down. What was it with Ozandians and going to fight the moment they heard her accent? Surely she wasn't the first Yurkian to ever not be in the damn army. Well, she had been in the army, but that was besides the point.

She turned around at the top of the turret, looking back out to the other fort. It wasn't long ago she'd heard a strange sound from over there. She'd half expected to see the man she'd burned lining up a balista. She wasn't sure what she was looking at from this distance, but a new flag was hanging from it. A red letter on a black background. Probably some kind of royal house.

The sound had probably been a portal of some kind. Mages would be in high demand. Using them now was an opportunity for any Ozandian who could get over their fear of magic. Because when everyone was dying, a mage could keep you and yours alive. They could turn the tide of battle in an instant. Make an inferior force into a superior one. If that group had utilised a mage, then they'd probably be able to hold the bridge indefinitely. Though from what she'd seen, it would be pointless. No protective spell would be able to hold back whatever wanted the bridge broken.

She turned and scurried down the stairs, and out of the fort. There were only two guards outside the fort, and both went down quickly with an elbow to the throat, crushing their larynx.

She turned and saw a panicking horse still tied up. She could risk it, but the creature probably wouldn't be able to be calmed down, not with the smoke so thick in the air. And she would be heading towards a city, that from what she could tell, was still burning.

Verity rolled her eyes and leaped down onto the road and began to jog up it.

She was close now. Incredibly close to her goal. If she was able to use the horse she'd only be a half day away. On foot, it would probably take her a full day. But she was almost to Ozandia. Almost ready to be able to help, and protect, this High Priestess.

Only days ago she was preparing to destroy this nation.

Now, she'd be happy if a single city could be saved from the calamity that was befalling the entire world. The sky was burning. Even Yurk might have been destroyed. No one could have prepared for this. Defending against the falling stones seemed to be a fool's errand. Maybe with the help of Sarin's avatar they might be able to protect the city, but nothing short of divine intervention would give them a chance to survive.

Yet, the images burning behind her eyes told a different story. She had the headaches, and the visions were coming and going faster than she could reconcile them. The future was changing. Whatever had caused the hellflame had completely altered how reality was supposed to play out. It had shattered the timelines, and they were attempting to compensate for it. Not everything was a possibility. Yet, somehow, something impossible had happened.

The only answer she knew of to explain it was divine intervention. A god suddenly deciding to screw the rules and fuck with reality as if they were on a honeymoon with it. It was a crass way of explaining the situation, but her calm had long ago evaporated. She'd seen a friend torn to shreds, she'd had to fight people she wanted to defend, and the world itself was coming to an end.

Atop of all that, she was seeing visions of all the players. People making incredible mistakes. She saw a wyrm fighting orks. She saw a low sister of the temple crying inside a protection spell. She saw a man sacrificing his life to drag people out of the smoke. She saw Falien kissing a woman amongst the ash and smoke. He was still a bastard, even when the sky itself was falling.

She didn't want any of this.

It didn't matter what she wanted though. It never had. She was a vessel of the gods, and that meant she would act as one. She was their soldier, whatever they wanted. She would carry out her orders, without hesitation.

If she didn't, there wouldn't a world left.

Guenivere

She didn't like being exposed out here. It wasn't just that the only bridge for miles might be in the middle of a massive battle and she might become a causality. They were close to the borderlands here. A remnant of an ancient war. One of the reasons Ozandians hated magic more than most humans did. Areas of the country where rules of reality just stopped working.

The borders of these areas where everything went insane weren't well-defined. They grew and shrank all the time, mostly held back by paladins. She was figuring that right about now most paladins were dead. First Calis wipes out ten thousand soldiers and a hundred paladins, and now fire falls from the literal sky. Leaning on the hope that somehow others had survived and were still willing to selflessly defend you was nothing more than a false hope. You would be disappointed, and then dead.

She might be a servant of the goddess, but if there was anything her faith had taught her, it was that blind faith was more dangerous than anything else. The gods didn't demand blind obedience, they didn't want it. They wanted those they could depend on. Heroes who could fight on their behalf who didn't need to have their hands held every step of the way.

The will to act was a holy virtue.

She wished she could act now. Act whilst the monster went below, charging headlong into a battle even he wouldn't be remotely prepared for. Unlike the idiot, she recognised the flag. It was the flag of a Fae house, the Kruei. The Fae. If it really was a Fae down there, and she wasn't sure how much she doubted it with what was happening overhead, then even that immortal bastard might risk death. The Fae were masters of all magic. Some legends even claimed they were the original source of magic, though others claimed that was the gods. In most things, the truth lay somewhere in-between.

Her injuries stopped her even trying to move. She'd lost her leg and nearly lost her life. It might have been better if she died. Better to be burned away than be forced to accompany this man. He didn't even hide what he was. He murdered and raped without conscience. The world was his to play with, however he pleased. He didn't care in the least.

Surviving just to become his toy was as cruel a fate as any.

Maybe the goddess hated her.

Shannon

Her palms were sweating, and her heart was racing. She didn't want to do this. She would much, much rather kill herself and be condemned to an eternity of punishment by the worst demonkind had to offer than to tell even a tenth of the truth to Antoinette.

She'd thought sitting on a pretty hill, overlooking a pretty valley, with a nice view of a pretty river would make it so she could focus. She could meditate and come down of this anxious high. She could not be more wrong. From here she could see the devastation being worked by her own hands. A devastation she couldn't actually stop without dying. The snow was melting quietly as the fire beside her crackled.

"What the hell?"

Shannon sighed heavily, grabbing a handful of grass in one hand and entirely failing not to burst into tears. She'd barely been able to glance in the direction of the woman. The guilt was eating away at her. Taking away the resolve she'd thought she'd had.

Antoinette sat beside her, an arm going around her, "Hey. Shhh. We can get through this. You can do this."

"No." Shannon bit her lip, "I can't, Antoinette. That's sort of the problem. I'm an idiot. I don't why the goddess picked me, but I've fucked up even worse than her last avatar."

Antoinette frowned, "Wasn't that Azrael? Who got the whole army destroyed at Calis?"

Shannon waved vaguely at the sky.

The woman put a head on her shoulder, "So you failed to stop the end of the world. It happens. You might be the High Priestess, but the last time I checked, you were still human, Shannon. We screw up. That's what we do. We're the weak ones. The ones who get to disappoint the gods. Why do you think so many of them pay attention to us of all creatures?"

"Not like this." Shannon choked, clenching her hands and fighting the lump in her throat. "Antoinette... I... I... I did this."

The woman squeezed her shoulder, "You can't hold yourself-"

"I did it." Shannon snapped, and breathed hard, "It wasn't... I did it. Not someone else. I called hellflame."

Antoinette froze and then leaned away from her slowly, "What? Why would you do that? Why the fuck did you do that!?"

Shannon pulled her knees up, burying her face, "I thought it was the only way I could stop Kru. I was wrong. And now everyone is dying because of me."

"The fuck." Antoinette whispered and then stood up, "Then stop it! If you did this, why hasn't it stopped yet!?"

Shannon shrugged weakly, "It'll stop when I'm dead. I'm the anchor."

Antoinette paced in front of her angrily, "I wish you hadn't told me."

Shannon just cried silently. She didn't have any defence for her actions. She wouldn't be opposed to a future where the woman she loved and who now actively hated her were to cut off her head to end the damned curse. It might even be the very best outcome. Antoinette could be the hero that saved the world. Saved it from her. If anyone was to write this tale, there was only one way it could go. Shannon was the penultimate villain.

Her intentions didn't matter. So many people had set out to do the right thing and become horrifying monsters. Goblins and orks were both created in an attempt to restore humanity to what they were before reality was shattered. Those creatures were among the most violent, the least human and the least kind. Maybe humanity was a problem. It wouldn't be for much longer. She'd seen to that. She didn't believe it was right. History might write her as the one who finally eradicated the human virus.

History could go fuck itself.

"I deserve to die." Shannon said slowly, "I had to tell you. I didn't want to. But I owe you this much, at least."

Antoinette spun around, her hand slamming into Shannon's cheek like a thunderclap, knocking her face-first into the dirt. She winced, but didn't complain. She sat up slowly, not daring to look up at her.

"Shut up, Shannon." Antoinette growled, "You don't get to walk out on this. You get to help me try and fix it."

"It ends when I do." Shannon shrugged, "That's not an escape. I don't deserve to escape. I know that."

"Shut up!" Antoinette yelled, her voice cracking.

Shannon continued to look at the ground as she heard Antoinette beginning to cry.

"Thirty nine million, seven hundred and eighty three thousand, two hundred and three." Shannon said slowly, "Those are the lives I owe. I don't ever get to be free, Antoinette. I don't ever get to make up for what I did. I don't ever get to make things right, because they can't be fixed. They can't be made right. I can't ever make up for the lives I've taken. I am everything that is wrong here. I'm sorry. My apology is worthless and shit, but I wanted to give it to you all the same."

Antoinette grabbed her by the front of her robe and dragged her to her feet, "You don't get to die, Shannon."

She looked into those teary green eyes, expecting to see an anger there that could level a city. But she didn't. All she saw was someone who was hurting, and who was desperate.

Shannon smiled sadly, "I've got some help, Antoinette. I found a Wyrms. And Yio, who isn't a quite a Fate anymore. Two heroes who can help turn the tide, and protect Ozandius, but they can't protect it if the hellflame continues to fall. No one can. The only way out of this for anyone, is if Ozandia can continue to stand. A haven for survivors. You, Rin, Nidoghr and Yio can make that happen. But not if I am still alive. I'm the anchor for this curse. The only way to stop it, is if I die."

Antoinette slapped her again, glaring, "That's not an option."

"I'm sorry." Shannon smiled weakly, "It's the only option, Antoinette. It'll happen, soon. For breaking a promise, someone else is going to take my life. And then the fire will stop, and you'll all get your chance to survive my mistake. I screwed up. There is nothing I can say, Antoinette. I deserve this. I don't... I don't get why you can't see that. I don't get why you want me to..."

Antoinette kissed her. Briefly, but warmly. She leaned her forehead against her, the tears running down both their cheeks, "Because you freaking idiot, I love you. I don't care what you've done, Shannon. I don't want to lose you."

"I killed Mytris." Shannon choked, "I would already have lost you if it weren't for him. All we ever had was borrowed time."

"I don't care." Antoinette snapped, pulling back, "Don't you get it? If the only way to keep you is to have this world burned to a fucking cinder, then it can burn! Yes, I know I'm being selfish. I don't care. I am pissed to high heaven at you, yes. I am incredibly disturbed and hurt by what you have done, yes. I don't know if I can ever trust you. What you're saying makes me trust you even less. All the same. None of that matters a flying fuck to me. I want... You."

Shannon smiled sadly, crying openly as she touched Antoinette's cheek, "Thankyou."

"Fuck you." Antoinette snapped, grabbing her hand, "You are not leaving me."

Shannon sighed, "I'm still the High Priestess. I don't deserve the title, or responsibility. But it has a responsibility. To protect you, and everyone else. I have to die. I love you too, Antoinette. Maybe you really are the best of all of us."

The girl glared, grabbing her cheeks, "I am not letting you go."

"I know." Shannon smiled, her heart breaking. "Nidoghr. It's time."

Antoinette screamed angrily, but vanished all the same.

A moment later the Wyrms appeared in front of her, his face grim within his mane. He looked at her, "You give your love. You give up your life. To atone for your mistakes. I have to say, you may well be the best human I have ever known."

"Stay by Antoinette." Shannon smiled, "Guide her. She is far better a person than I could ever hope to be. If you give her a chance, she'll honour your hope to see something better in humanity. Better than I am."

The Wyrms bowed his head slowly, "Are you certain that your death alone will cause the end of the hellflame?"

"Yes."

He held out his hand, a blade of flames crackling into existence, the ground beneath it blackening and dying almost instantly.

"Stop." A voice growled, and they turned to see Yio. She was leaning on her knees, breathing hard from running. As they'd left her nearly half the continent away, it made sense that she would be tired. Even if she had the ability to move through a channel, they were few and far between in the human world.

Yio straightened, placing a hand on the hilt of the sword at her hilt, "She doesn't deserve an honourable death by your hand, Wyrms."

So she'd sprinted and transported all the way here just to execute her. It made a certain amount of sense. Yio had always sought to influence the mortal world. What Shannon had done to it had to feel like a personal affront. She'd destroyed all the good work of the woman.

"Whoever." Shannon sighed, "It doesn't matter. The longer you delay, the more people die. Kill me. Now."

Nidoghr slammed through her, and Shannon gasped, collapsing forward.

She smiled as she hit the ground, a numbness spreading through her. The cold wrapped around her, moving upwards from her waist. It was done. With this, she could finally give everyone a chance.

It was more than they'd had.

Antoinette

She hit the cobbled streets of Ozandius, barely seeing a blink of a man with a flowing silky black beard, and then he was gone.

She burst into tears, holding herself.

Shannon was dead.

Mytris was dead.

How many others were dead? Did it even matter anymore? Everyone might as well be. Even if this stopped the hellflame, they had just lost the first woman to stand up and lead them out of the dark. Despite what Shannon thought, that couldn't be Antoinette. She had too many ties. She was a princess. A pawn in the hands of kings. She couldn't be the one to command kings and force them to do what she wanted.

Shannon was giving her this responsibility, without even noticing the kind of burden it brought. Just like she had when she'd made her the Head of Discipline, in a world that felt like another life.

Antoinette let the thought trail off and die. She was looking for excuses to hate her. She shouldn't have to look far. The sky was burning. The city was still burning. So many people were dead or dying. Killed outright, poisoned, or victims of the opportunists. Yet... Despite Shannon being the one who had literally brought the world to its knees, Antoinette couldn't hate her.

She didn't understand it. All she felt when she thought of Shannon was a quiet aching in her heart. She wanted to hate her. She wanted to be able to blame her. To throw the grief she was feeling at the woman and let her take the burden of what she had lost.

She wanted to be able to turn all of her sadness and depression into anger, burning like a light against one person.

But she couldn't. Not if that one person was Shannon.

It wasn't fair.

Why did she have to go and fall for someone like her? Shannon might look meek, but she wasn't. She was hurt. She was damaged. Beyond the damage though, she was something else. She was a street kid who had endured what every other street kid had to. You couldn't survive on the streets of Ozandia and still be a coward. Couldn't survive without picking up your own demons.

Shannon, in the end, was merciful. She contained her anger, because she could hurt so many. Because she didn't know how to prevent bystanders from being drawn in and destroyed. Shannon was stronger than anyone else she knew. Strong enough that even though she was bearing the burden of destroying the world, she still sought out Antoinette to say sorry. Not to explain herself, nor to ask forgiveness. To apologise to someone who meant something to her.

No one else could summon hellflame. No one else would be able to even consider it.

Maybe that was why Sarin had trusted Shannon.

Because she knew what Shannon would be capable of, push come to shove.

"Sister Antoinette!"

She looked over, trying to steel herself and stop the tears. Eri ran up, pausing, "You're back. From the castle. How?"

Antoinette smiled weakly, standing up, "Shannon. She sent a Wyrms to save me."

“A freaking dragon!?” Eri exploded and shook her head, “That’s our High Priestess.”

“She’s dead.” Antoinette whispered, and Eri went still, silent.

She turned, looking at the fires burning overhead. It didn’t seem like they’d slowed down. Maybe that’d take time. Or maybe Shannon had been wrong about that as well. “She thought her sacrifice would stop the hellflame.”

She wasn’t about to tell them that Shannon was also the cause. Nobody would understand. They’d hate her, and curse her. Try and erase her name from history without every realising that it was Sarin who granted miracles. Sarin who trusted Shannon knew what she was doing when she called for the world to be destroyed. Shannon might not have believed that she’d done the right thing, but the goddess had trusted her judgement.

Who were lowly sisters to question it?

Antoinette swallowed, “She’s trusting us to protect Ozandia. To turn it into a safe haven for all survivors. The world might well be falling. Nations are falling... But Ozandia will stand as a beacon. That humanity won’t be covered so easily.”

Eri winced, “Are... Are you okay, Antoinette?”

“Fuck no.” She smiled ruefully, “I’m pissed at Shannon. I’m pissed at myself. I’m pissed at Yurk and King Iza. But I don’t have time to deal with that. The city is burning down. That’s a great beacon, but not really helpful in the surviving side of things.”

Eri put a hand on her hip, “You can take five minutes. I know you liked her.”

Antoinette shook her head, “No. I can’t afford that. Because if I start crying again, I’m not going to stop. We need a way to stop the fires. And to stop the palace interfering with us.”

Eri frowned, “How can we do that?”

Antoinette shrugged, “Apparently we have help coming. The Wyrms who saved me, and... Lady Yio.”

Eri’s eyes grew into saucers, “A Fate?”

“Not quite.” Antoinette frowned, “From what Sarin has hinted to me, Yio is now mortal. Still, she’s on Hero’s level.”

Eri nodded slowly, “So, we have to prepare.”

Antoinette nodded, “Prepare for survivors. Healing and guards. Patrols to find the wounded. Patrols to find materials and ingredients. We’re setting up a hospice.”

The low sister grinned at her, “Shannon would be proud of you.”

Antoinette bit her lip, feeling a hot angry tear roll down her cheek, “Please don’t start.”

Falien

He looked through the open door of the keep at the lounging guards and felt a bead of sweat appear on his forehead. Fear crept slowly down his spine as he saw one of them look to him, see him, and dismiss him. He wasn't important enough for the creature to move.

It really was a creature, and not a man. The skin was brown, and furred. The shoulders were incredibly wide. The face bore tusks like a wild boar. There was only one thing the creatures could be. They were orks. A beserker species capable of incredible destruction and devastating magic. They were born to be warriors. Born to kill, and revel in the blood of their enemy.

He swallowed nervously and let the door swing closed. Then he turned and ran. He sprinted up the hilltop towards his toy. He couldn't fight a bunch of orks, even if killing him was a task that even they might not be up to. He had no desire to go through that kind of pain. Even if it meant they had to find another path towards Ozandia. He would take the weeks of travel threatening death by hellflame over death by ravaging hoard.

He wouldn't be able to protect Gwen if they decided to attack. Hopefully they continued to think he was an irrelevant human, not even worth the effort of killing.

He paused, out of breath, and looked cautiously over his shoulder. It didn't look like any had come after him, not yet. They might still, and considering that the orks appeared to be lumbering beasts of pure muscle, they could outdistance a prince who overslept most days without any effort at all.

He flinched as he heard a scream from inside the fort. It sounded human, but it wasn't a scream of pain.

It was a scream of anger.

He turned and began moving up the hill again. Gwen was trying to stand up, he motioned for her to stop and lay down next to her, eyes on the fort. "Something weird is happening there. There's orks."

The woman swallowed, "I heard a scream."

He glared at the fought, "So did I. I think... Someone is fighting there. Though who would be dumb enough to fight an ork, I couldn't..."

He trailed off as he saw an ork tumble from the top of the tower.

Gwen swallowed nervously, "Who the hell could win against... That. Holy crap that thing was huge. Are all the orks that size?"

He shrugged, "I assume so... Someone can actually fight them?"

They both shivered as there was a burst of red from a window. They didn't know if it was the ork, or something else. Whatever was fighting them.

The flag on the side of the fort burst into flames.

Falien smiled slowly, "I think... Something just cleared the way for us."

Gwen glared at him, "Is it safe?"

Verity

Ozandia.

She breathed heavily, leaning on her knees. Feeling something leaking from the wound on her back. But, she was here. Finally on the edge of the city. It was burning. The walls were torn down, and there were no guards at the entrance.

This wasn't the grand city she'd pictured. She could see so many shacks and shanties set up by the homeless, though she couldn't see any of them. Probably attempting to take shelter underground, in the sewers and labyrinths beneath the city.

The lack of guards was disturbing.

Even if most had been recalled to deal with the fires spreading throughout the city, some would have been left to guard the wall. To keep refugees out. That there were no guards meant one of two things. First, that the king had fled the city and taken everyone with him. Or second, the king had walled himself up in his palace and decided to screw his people.

Either way, it was the citizens getting hurt. Not the people in power who might have had a chance to reduce the impact of the disaster.

She walked through the gateway, looking around at the empty streets and burning buildings. There were bodies here. Some dead from the explosion, some from fire. Others seemed to have just curled up and died. Poisoned.

She tore a piece of her undershirt off and tied it over her mouth, and began to quickly move through the city. She was aiming vaguely for the temple, trying to remember the map the general had shown her. She didn't quite remember where it was, and couldn't see any towering spires to guide her, but they might have been destroyed.

The sisters were some of the few who stood a chance at helping with the disaster. The miracles of Sarin could protect them.

Verity smiled slowly, stopping as she heard a dagger drawn behind her. "Robbing on days like this. You've got some balls, kid."

"Ozandia doesn't need strangers right now." The voice growled angrily, "I think you should leave."

She turned around slowly, hands in the air. The man talking to her was burned. Half his face had been scarred, turned into a mess of broken skin and stretched channels. His hand on the dagger was steady, but she could tell one of his eyes had been blinded, and he wasn't accustomed to it yet. She was right on the edge of his vision. She could duck passed and hurt him. However, he held the knife like an old friend. He might be able to work on instinct alone.

"I have been sent to aide the High Priestess, by Sarin." She stated slowly, shifting her feet to brace for an attack, "I will not fail in that mission."

The man sheathed his knife slowly, "Sarin sent you? Does she see what is happening here? We're dead."

Verity winced, "I know. I'm late."

He blinked, "Huh. I can show the way. Call me Red. Everyone else does."

He lead her through a warren of streets, ducking into alleyways to bypass ruins and flaming stones. He waved around him, "It seems to be okay if you limit your exposure to the smoke. We're

staying underground for the most part. The king is... Well, he blames the Sisters for this shit. Calling them mages and witches and so on. King Iza has never been the most... Stable of leaders. Quick to anger, slow to realise when he's made a mistake. Frankly, he's a bastard. Rebellion was coming anyway. Now he abandons us all. Holing up in his damn palace. It was built ages ago. Literally. Past eras. The throne apparently has elfin and shit in it. Didn't believe in that. Not before today. Now, I'm not so sure."

Verity welcomed the history lesson. If the king's palace really was from the era when humans and elfin were at war, then penetrating it would be practically impossible. She hoped she wouldn't be leading a bunch of terrorists and weak sisters against a military force, but she couldn't count it out at this point.

An angry roar split the air, and she dropped to the ground.

Red laughed back at her, "That's just -"

"A fucking wyrm." Verity finished for him.

He blinked, "Huh. So you recognised it. Yeah. He's helping us. At the moment, that means moving the rocks further away. Not much more he can do. Apparently there's a shitload of magic in the air."

Verity stood up, brushing herself off, "I'd watch yourself. A wyrm can't be trusted. They live by their own code. Violate it... And you won't have a chance to find out what you did wrong."

"He's a pacifist." Red laughed, leading her passed a burning clothesline, "Seriously. Can you believe it? All that power. Wasted."

She didn't believe it. Not for a moment. Not if this was the same wyrm she'd been having visions about. He'd torn through the orks like they were nothing. To defend the low sister.

"This High Priestess... Is she a brunette? Grey eyes?"

Red nodded, "Yeah. That sounds like Shannon. Why?"

"I thought it might be." Verity said non-committal. So the woman really had tried shaking up the temple. Tried to get rid of the importance of the rank. Maybe if she'd had more time she might have been able to succeed.

Red waved a hand as they entered a square, "Just down that pipe ahead."

Guinevere

She limped down the hill, an arm around Falien's shoulders.

He seemed quieter. More reserved, after what they had just witnessed. She couldn't blame him. Something had walked through the orks like they weren't even there. She could see one dead creature propping open the door to the fort as they approached.

What on the continent could fight something so strong, so violent? Orks were the stuff of nightmares. They were barely controlled creatures infused with rage and corrupted magic. They were more dangerous than anything else that humanity had legends about fighting. Even the Fae could be reasoned with. Even the Fae didn't actually want to kill you. They carried out war because it was the only option. Whereas orks... They carried out war because it was what they idolised above all else.

There was no stopping a war once it was joined. The orks would fight to the last man, woman or child.

Falien paused by the doorway, and spoke with a terrified voice, "Anybody home?"

"About time." A female voice snapped, and the ork in the doorway vanished as it was dragged in.

Guinevere limped inside, with Falien, and they both watched the figure in confusion and wonder.

It wasn't human.

It was Fae.

The wings on their back had a soft luminescence to them, a barely discernible green floating across the nearly transparent surface. Their hair was blonde, a tumbling silky mess that was stuck upright in a messy bun, held in place by two small silver... Normally Guinevere would have called them needles, but looking at the stance of the Fae she was tempted to call them spikes instead. The eyes of the Fae were a brilliant blue, like the sea at the edge of the continent.

The woman herself seemed no less violent now she wasn't massacring the creatures. A cloud seemed to hang around her, of death and anger.

She swallowed nervously, "You were expecting us?"

The Fae turned, smiling at her, "Sure. Something like that. I'm here to make sure that you both get to Ozandia."

Falien glared, "Why would I trust a Fae?"

"Because you're dead without me." The Fae snapped, "You might be cursed, Prince Falien, but even that curse isn't enough to stop me killing you if I was inclined. The same goes for these orks. Any half-rate mage could remove that curse without breaking a sweat. It was created by a half-starved orphan. Do you really think it is anything compared to an actual mage? Humans might be useless with magic, I am not."

Guinevere looked sideways at the man holding her.

So he was cursed. He couldn't die because of it. Was he a Tyrsan from the curse as well? Or had he always been?

Could she escape him if the curse was broken?

"Sit down, sister." The Fae instructed, and Falien delicately lowered her onto a nearby bench.

Guinevere smiled tightly, "I'm sorry, Fae. My people don't have... Good stories about your people."

The Fae smiled, "Nor mine of yours. I am Astrian, Governor of Calis."

Guinevere blinked in surprise, "Calis was destroyed."

"I rebuilt it." Astrian said crouching in front of her, looking at her burned leg, "Well. At least this is simple."

Guinevere groaned, biting her lip as the Fae sprinkled green dust from her hand. As the dust touched her leg she felt the nerves reignite, screaming. She could feel it shrivelling and expanding at the same time. Feel the skin regrowing. The muscle fibres stitching back together.

The Fae stood up, and frowned, "Burned your chest as well. Eh. This'll work."

She produced a flask from her belt, handing it to Guinevere, and turned, "As for you, Falien... You need to watch yourself. There are people in Ozandia, if they knew who you were, they would kill you without hesitation. They would succeed. For someone like me, it is so easy to climb inside your head. To see all your secrets. To know what you want better than you do. I could hear you plotting and scheming from Calis. To use Guinevere. She's a more than a toy, you asshole. The reason she can resist you, which makes her so fantastic for you, is because she knows what you are. She hates you, down to her core. As do I."

Guinevere looked at the Fae in surprise, "You can hear our thoughts... From Calis?"

"Always." Astrian replied tiredly, "That's what it means to be me. When I lived at home, I could hear the whole of the Evening Realms. It is difficult to pick one voice from the throng... But certain voices always stand out. Some of the Fae, like Janus, were able to conceal their thoughts. It's a discipline. But for most, I knew them. Humans on the other hand... None of you have the discipline. You walk around broadcasting your thoughts and emotions, because you have no idea that it is normal to be able to see and hear them. Every Fae has some sense of what another is feeling. Most can hear your thoughts. Elfin are similar to that in most regards. Humans are the oddity."

Falien smiled slowly, "You hear them louder than most Fae... Why did you save Calis?"

Astrian sat down next to Guinevere, "Because I loved a man. Because I loved someone that I can't have. Because I imprinted on a man I can't have. Every fibre of my being is obsessed with being by his side. Every moment of every day I am not with him, hurts. But here... I can't hear him. Not unless he visits. Being as far from him as I can get is the right thing for both of us. He'll move on. Fall for Summer more every day. I get to grow into a bitter old woman, alone."

Guinevere swallowed, "Summer. As in... Sumner? The lost goddess?"

"Sumner sacrificed herself to create the Fae." Astrian yawned, as if it were something even a child should know, "Lady Summer, Queen of the Fae, was her reincarnation. A god, in Faen form. Limited by the physical nature of the Fae. She married Trei'el. He's... A god. I guess. I don't think he thinks of himself as one. He's more than that. And he's... Part of the world. He chose to live with Summer. To limit himself so he could be with her."

Guinevere sighed, "That must hurt."

Astrian looked at her in surprise, "You have a kind heart. Too bad you're stuck with him."

Falien rolled his eyes, "I'm not entirely terrible."

"If you didn't need to walk I'd rip your balls off and feed them to you." Astrian snapped back

at him.

Guinevere swallowed nervously, "Why do we need to go to Ozandia? I know I wanted to... But this seems like something more."

"It is." Astrian sighed, "Prince Falien, you will soon meet Princess Ariadne. She needs your help. Ozandia is under siege. From orks, and Yurk."

Falien collapsed onto a seat, and Guinevere looked at him in surprise. As if the spark had gone out from him.

She'd never seen him look so serious.

"Princess Ariadne?"

Falien sighed heavily, "My father attempted to wipe out her family when he seized power. If Ariadne and I were to marry, then Yurk... Would stabilise. Tane would have to back off, the people wouldn't be demanding hopes and dreams like this war. We would be their hope. To show that the future and the past have an opportunity. I would have to act the crown prince. I wouldn't get to keep you."

Guinevere glared, "I never wanted you to have me. Sounds like a win to me."

He smiled sadly, "You have no idea how much it hurts me to hear you say that. Which I guess, I deserve."

Astrian grinned, "Void. You deserve far more than a little heartache, Falien. What did you do to get cursed? Have you told Guenivere, yet? Told her how you still feel no guilt? You're nothing but a monster. You deserve to be put down, like a rabid dog. Unfortunately, the world needs you. The orks won't back down. Yurk and Ozandia, together, might have a chance to survive."

Guenivere sighed, "Can't you help us?"

"Calis will assist." Astrian sighed, "Me too. But I'm just a Fae, sister. To you, I might be an awe-inspiring weapon of destruction. To Kru, the leader of the orks... I'm not her equal. She and I have fought before. She won. She's a Fae. And more. A goddess. Like Trei."

Guenivere winced, standing up on her new leg, and nodded slowly, "Sounds like we have a war to fight. I need to get to the High Priestess, serve my part."

"She's dead." Astrian whispered.

Guinevere's eyes widened, "What?"

Astrian sighed heavily, "It isn't my place to say. Not all of it. Shannon sacrificed herself, believing it would stop the hellflame from falling. She was right, at least in part. The hellflame will stop with the sacrifice of her soul, however, part of her soul is bound to Falien here. And as he can't die, neither can that part of the High Priestess."

Guenivere glared at Falien, "You abused my High Priestess?"

He raised his hands, "No. You're the only sister I've slept with. I'm pretty sure."

"She was a street orphan, at the time." Astrian growled.

Falien's eyes widened in terror, and Guenivere clenched her fists as she put it together. "You raped a child from the street. A child who cursed you to never die, to never enjoy your life. You are the worst thing in this world that exists. Why do we need him?"

Astrian sighed, "Because Yurk will follow him. He had the good luck to be born into a position

of power that we need right now. Or I would have ripped off his nuts by now.”

Guenivere felt hot angry tears running down her cheeks as she glared at the man. A man who pretended to be so happy with the world. A man who had taken the world from a young girl, because he felt like it.

There was nothing good about the man.

No redeeming qualities at all.

Falien sighed slowly, “Your High Priestess, if she was that girl, is the only one who can break my curse.”

“Not true.” Astrian grinned, “Like I said. That might be true for pathetic human mages. I’m Fae. I am a source of magic. Real magic. Not the dregs and drabs your world is used to. The whole city of Calis was destroyed by a Fae trying to hold back her power. Can any of your mages actually match us? Vastras could, but she was exceptional in almost every regard. Are there many more like her?”

Falien swallowed nervously, “Then why don’t you? Break the curse. You might be able to get your High Priestess back.”

“Because we need Yurk.” Astrian sighed heavily. “Ozandia needs Yurk. You can give us that. You can’t if I kill you. And you really should stop trying to convince me otherwise.”

“I want to die.” Falien replied.

Guenivere saw it. She finally saw what Falien saw in her. She could punish him. She did punish him, over and over. She tortured him, and he felt free because of it. She alleviated his conscience by hating him. It was disgusting. He was using her to feel no guilt. Using her hatred as an excuse to feel like he didn’t owe anyone.

Astrian stood slowly, “Well, it’s time we get going, wouldn’t you say?”

Falien smiled tightly, standing up, “I guess. If you’re not about to kill me.”

“I need you.” Astrian said as if it soured her tongue, “The moment I don’t, I will come for you. Does that fill you with hope?”

Guenivere glared at her companion. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything.

He was so much worse than she’d thought.

Antoinette

"We can't risk it!" Antoinette shouted at Yio, who was leaning on a table, her clenched hands betraying her desire to draw her sword.

Yio glared at her angrily, "If we don't risk anything, we can't achieve anything."

"We don't have enough people to push for the palace." Antoinette snapped, "We have maybe two dozen people fit to fight. Even with you on our side, it ain't enough. We don't have any soldiers, Yio. No heroes. Just people who will get absolutely slaughtered."

Yio tossed up her hands, "If we don't take the palace, we'll just be waiting around for the king to hunt us down. All he has to do is light the damn sewers on fire and we're voiden."

Antoinette bit off her angry reply as she saw Red emerging into the cavern, she sighed, "I hope you have decent news."

He shrugged, "Maybe. Apparently this Yurkian was sent by Sarin."

Antoinette glared at the newcomer. They were poorly dressed, just underclothes. They were wounded all over. They walked like a soldier. Why would someone like this be sent by Sarin? They were probably a deserter or an assassin.

"Make your case."

The newcomer undid the bandanna over her mouth, and breathed heavily, instantly regretting it from the smell. "I am Verity, of Yurk. I am also a prophet. Sarin came to me. She held off Yurk's army. She told me unless I could assist the High Priestess, something like this would happen. That the High Priestess would make a mistake. That I could help her avoid them."

Antoinette swallowed nervously. She hadn't told anyone that this was Shannon's fault. The woman was dead. Why bother?

"Shannon is dead." She said, her voice cracking.

The newcomer shook her head, "No. No she's not."

Antoinette clenched her fists, "Yes, she is. She sacrificed herself, to try and get the fires to stop."

The woman went white, "Wait... She summoned it? What the fuck?"

Antoinette glared at her, "What would you know, Yurkian?"

The woman clenched her fists, "Enough to know that a sacrifice to break a spell has to be involved in creating it. Miracles aren't much different."

"Clear the room." Antoinette whispered.

Yio glared up at her, and then sighed, "Come on Red, Eri."

Antoinette walked over, "You're a soldier."

"And a prophet." The woman replied. "I see things. Things all the gods want me to see. I used to serve Wrodin."

Antoinette rolled her eyes, "The bastard who put us in this position? Awesome. Just awesome. Wrodin was behind the fall of Eldrasa, and the rise of Kru. It was his mistakes that made it all possible. Sorry if I don't want you around... But I don't."

The woman looked at her slowly, and her eyes softened, "Sorry. I didn't know about the High Priestess."

Antoinette winced, "Oh fuck. You're looking at my history, aren't you?"

"I'm a prophet." The woman replied, "I don't have a choice. I see what the gods want me to see."

"It isn't allowed." Antoinette said, turning back to her scratchings of maps on the tabletop. "At least I saw her, before the end."

"She isn't dead."

Antoinette punched the table top, "She was cut in half by a wyrm. The man told me himself. How do you survive that? Can you tell me? Shannon wanted to die. To atone. For calling this shitstorm down on us. She thought it was the only way to stop the bloody orks."

The prophet frowned, walking up to the table, "The orks... They're lead by Kru, right?"

"Yes." Antoinette sighed, "She's... A goddess. She was Fae. Now she's not."

"The Fel." The woman nodded slowly, "I saw a flag on one of the forts over the river Oz. A red 'K', on a black background."

Antoinette smiled weakly, "Well, if you look to the east of the city, you'll see an entire army encampment dotted with those flags. Kru's invaded. Seems she doesn't mind the absolute devastation of the world. She's demanding that Ozandia surrender. Which is why everyone around here is anxious to get to the palace. It looks like the king wants to pick a fight. We can't win. Not against orks. We can't count how many there are."

"Three million." Verity swallowed, "Or that's the advance guard, according to Sarin."

Antoinette flinched, "Holy fuck. Three million orks and elfin. No wonder Kru isn't in a hurry. She doesn't have to be. Well... Just to make things worse, we also have five thousand Yurkians camped to the west."

"Five." The woman said weakly, "So only a quarter survived, then."

Antoinette frowned, "Huh. Do you think you could help me calm down the Yurkians?"

"Maybe." The woman shrugged, "I'm a deserter in their eyes. No more than an escaped slave."

Antoinette shivered, "I forgot about that crap. Geeze."

The woman glanced at her, "I thought Ozandians didn't keep slaves."

"We don't." Antoinette smiled sheepishly, "But I'm not Ozandian by birth. I'm Yurkian. Well, Verity, you gave me your name. Least I can do is return the favour. I am Princess Ariadne."

The woman's eyes widened in surprise, "You're alive. Wow. That does change things... If I can convince the general that you are in charge... He'll want to meet you. In person. He'll be willing to agree to a ceasefire, so he can confirm who you are."

Antoinette sighed heavily, "Better nothing. Let me guess, confirm who I am so he can cut off my head?"

"No." The woman screwed up her nose, "People still remember your family. And well... Prince Falien is a piece of shit. The army tried to kill him on the way here. Speaking of which, he's... Important. To events. Also, I'm not sure he can actually die."

Antoinette blew a tuft of her hair, "Awesome. Any ideas where he is?"

“Close.” The woman said vaguely, “If you can get me some ingredients, I might be able to find him for you.”

She winced, “Magic. Right?”

“To enhance my gift.” The woman shrugged, “You serve a goddess. Do you really hate magic that much?”

“No.” Antoinette replied, “I used magic, recently. To save a friend. He still ended up dying... But... I think we got it wrong. Sarin didn’t want to take magic away. She wanted us to understand it. We’ve... Abused it. Used it to kill. It’s supposed to be a gift.”

“Sorry, I’m not religious.” The woman replied.

Antoinette smiled, “So you don’t care about your actions?”

“I’m a soldier.” Verity replied easily, “I take orders, and carry them out. My superiors get to worry about the outcomes. For myself, I don’t tend to see the consequences of my actions. Not personally. It’s an easier way to live.”

Antoinette shrugged, looking down at the charcoal scratches, “Maybe. If you stick around, I’m sure you’ll see consequences in this. We’re on a knife edge... The general would be willing to meet me. I think I can convince Kru to talk as well. The only problem in all of this is King Iza. He’s in charge of the city.”

“So?” Verity smiled, “We take the palace. You have a wyrm.”

“He’s a pacifist.” Antoinette winced, “He killed Shannon for what she did, after she promised to find a non-violent solution. Right now, we can be grateful he’s trying to move the stones away from our general area. We can’t count on him to help. Yio, on the other hand... She was a Fate. She’s a strong warrior, and she is angry as hell. She’s both an asset, and a crazy liability.”

Verity smiled weakly, “How many men do you have?”

“A couple dozen who won’t die immediately. Probably a couple dozen more who won’t even be able to block the first blow.” Antoinette sighed heavily, and then looked up, “Why are you so convinced Shannon is still alive?”

Verity tapped her skull, “I can see her. Or I think it’s her. Brunette, dressed as a low sister. Grey eyes.”

Antoinette swallowed, “Well, you saw me kiss her, too. Right?”

Verity smiled sheepishly, “Yes. I’m pretty sure it’s her.”

“Where is she?”

Verity shook her head, “Not like that. I can see her in the future. Not now. I can see her standing in front of a temple. It’s new. The smoke is still in the air, but thin. Faded. I can see her after all this is over.”

Antoinette sighed, “Maybe someone else gets to resurrect her. Or Sarin does once Kru can’t interfere anymore. Or maybe that future hasn’t realised she’s dead yet.”

Verity nodded, “Yeah. It can be hard to work stuff out. I could find her, though. The same way I could find Falien. It isn’t easy on my body, but I could do it.”

“We need her.” Antoinette swallowed, “She didn’t hesitate when it mattered. I do. I’m not a leader.”

“You’ve kept these folk alive.” Verity replied, “That seems like leadership to me.”

Antoinette met the gaze of her pink eyes and smiled weakly, “It isn’t. Leadership means more than just surviving. That might be enough in the army, but we’re not an army. We’re a bunch of scared rebels and sisters. Half of these people haven’t even thrown a punch in anger before. They need hope. Not just life.”

Verity shrugged, “Maybe we can have it with Falien. He can’t die. Maybe we can send him to the palace.”

“I thought you said he was a piece of shit.”

The woman smiled weakly, “He is. He has a way of... Getting inside your head. He makes women sleep with him. He doesn’t actually care about anyone. Just interested in indulging himself as much as possible. He wants luxury.”

Antoinette clenched a fist, “He’s a rapist. And you say we need him?”

“Not me.” Verity winced, “I was hoping he’d die. Hoping he didn’t matter. But in every future I’ve seen where he isn’t in Ozandia, it falls.”

Antoinette sighed heavily, “Fine. I’ll get Rin to look for him. She’s a... She can feel things. I don’t want the others seeing you do magic. It won’t help anything right now. People will care, a lot. They’ll kill you. I’m hoping you’ll prove useful.”

Verity sighed heavily, “I am a soldier. Maybe I can make sure some of yours don’t get dead straight away. Some quick lessons.”

Antoinette nodded, “Thank you. Maybe we can find an opportunity later for you to hunt for Shannon.”

Verity smiled at her, “You haven’t lost her yet. There’s still hope.”

She didn’t say anything.

Shannon was dead. That future had died.

Falien

He followed the Fae slowly, unsure of what he was to expect in this burned out city. Ozandia was not what he remembered. The beautiful architecture had been reduced to cinders. The beautiful people were nowhere to be found. Just the corpses lying in the street. The charred remains of skeletons, desperately trying to shield themselves and their children.

This wasn't something to conquer. It felt more akin to wandering through the ruins of some forgotten society. If the smoke didn't still cling to the air, nothing would separate these wrecks from the ancient ruins of the Fae in his homeland.

The woman in front of him was confident, and beyond strong. He had no idea what her limits were. She was Fae. He'd always thought the stories of them overplayed their power. Humans had defeated and evicted the Fae from their world in a bygone era. If anything, the stories underplayed. They made the Fae seem more realistic because the audience could not comprehend just how powerful these creatures were. The Fae left, because they wanted to leave.

Magic had been abandoned by humanity, but the truth was that without it they didn't stand a chance against things like the Fae. Magic was the great equaliser. Removing the difference between an army and a determined band of adventurers. Yet, even if humanity summoned every mage that they had scattered across the entire continent, it wouldn't be enough if the Fae decided to attack them in force.

The Fae lead him down a canal, and he gagged. The smell was putrid. This was a festering sewer.

Was that what he was reduced to, now?

Prince of a nation, creeping around in the sewers of a dying city.

The Fae waved as she entered, "Sister Antoinette, I am Astrian, of Calis."

The sister looked over tiredly, and Falien blinked in surprise as he saw the woman standing there. It was the green-eyed girl from his childhood trip here. The one he wanted for himself, but couldn't have. The one that lead him to make his mistake.

Beside her was a Yurkian soldier he vaguely recognised. A woman he'd had for himself recently.

It was all connected. Everything.

This moment was inevitable.

He was as tied to each of these individuals as he was to humankind. The Fates had to have been moving him like a chess piece for all these years. Putting him in the right place at the right moment, to change the future of his world.

He wasn't certain whether to be reviled or honoured.

Astrian waved a hand, "This is Prince Falien of Yurk, and Sister Guinevere of Caledon."

Antoinette smiled slowly, "Astrian. Thank you."

"I'm not alone either." Astrian stated confidently, "Calis is coming to your aide. The army takes a bit more effort to move. I'll have them here by sundown. A hundred mages, three hundred soldiers. All of them have fought. All of them know just what horror a war can be."

Astrian turned, glaring directly at him, "If you hurt anyone here, I will take your balls. Is that clear?"

Falien held up his hands, "I'm not going to try and hurt anyone."

"That's not what I said." Astrian glared, and then the air shimmered and she was gone.

He sighed heavily, and then looked up, "I've been separated from the Yurkian forces since before the sky burned... But I think, with the right incentive, I can negotiate a truce."

"Good." Antoinette snapped, "I already have a ceasefire. You can come with me in three hours, when I go and see the general in charge. Prince Falien, I am known to most as Sister Antoinette, it is a name I like and enjoy, but it isn't the one I was born to."

He swallowed nervously, and bowed, "Princess Ariadne."

This was fate. There was no other way to say it. He'd nearly been connected to her as a child. Their destinies were interwoven throughout a pattern of history that was too complex for his mind to handle. He couldn't picture all the events that had to go just right for that first meeting, and now this one.

She sighed heavily, "Our marriage is one answer to this. I do have another, though. One I'd prefer."

Falien smiled up at her, "I'm all ears. As you can see, I do have someone I want for my consort."

Gwen snapped angrily, "I don't want you. Where are the other sisters?"

The soldier waved a hand, "Let me escort you."

Falien smiled sadly as she left the room. He really did want her. He didn't know why. He didn't know how he could make things up to her. He had been misleading her. Manipulating her. He didn't want that anymore. He wanted the angry woman who could put him in his place. A woman who could be more than just his queen, but his equal.

Antoinette sighed, leaning against the only furnishing in the room, a table covered in maps, "Ozandia is still currently under King Iza's rule. So I can't make any promises. But... That might not stay that way."

Falien winced, "I'm not a politician, Princess. I've shirked my duties just about from the day I was born. Spit it out."

She glared at him, "I'm not a princess. I've been a Sister of Sarin most of my life. However, I am planning to seize the crown of Ozandia. That's what I will offer to Yurk. Ozandia will become a city-state, under the Yurkian Empire. Your king, your father, gets to call himself emperor. My people get to remain free, in everything but word. We'll pay a tribute."

Falien shrugged, "That might work. But you will need to be uncontested. Iza will have to be dead, and this ork army... It can't be here."

Antoinette winced, "If Yurk and Ozandia work together -"

"No." Falien shook his head, "My father won't agree to that. He won't care there are millions of orks on his own doorstep. Right now, Ozandius is in the way. So the orks don't matter to him. They pose no threat in his mind. Yurk has never been defeated in war. We've agreed to truces and treaties, but never been defeated. That's all my father will see. He isn't... Kind."

Antoinette sighed, "So I have to sweeten the deal then."

Falien winced, "If the future queen of Yurk was in Ozandia, then the general could be convinced to attack the orks. With your help, and Calis', we might stand a chance. Military strategy isn't my best. But the general would feel compelled to protect you, even if we were just engaged."

“You can’t break off a royal engagement.” Antoinette growled at him, those green eyes flashing, “If we get engaged, that’s it.”

“I don’t want you.” Falien sighed, “I want the one woman I can’t have. I won’t be able to pursue her if I marry you. You’ll be able to keep whatever you have on the side. I won’t care and no one would stop you. It’s normal. Political marriages aren’t about love. So long as we provide an heir, most people will let us do our own thing in private. But I won’t be able to pursue Gwen. That’d be too public.”

Antoinette smiled sadly, “The one I care about, princeling, is dead. They died trying to protect Ozandia.”

He paused, looking at her, and sighed heavily. “I guess, if we have to, we have to. Those orks can’t be allowed to take Ozandius as a foothold... How do you plan to remove Iza from the picture?”

Antoinette sighed, “Right now? No idea. I don’t have the forces to take the palace. We can get inside alright. We have secret tunnels and so on. We even have weapons snuck inside, thanks to a rebellion that was about to happen anyway. But I’ve only really got a dozen useful soldiers. One was a Fate, but is now mortal. She’s probably the most important asset, but I can’t let her fight a hundred soldiers by herself.”

Falien nodded grimly, “I... Don’t fight. But I can’t die, not easily. I’m not sure if I’d be help or hindrance, but I’ll do whatever you want me to.”

Antoinette’s face went pale.

Falien raised an eyebrow, “What is it?”

“A Yurkian lord.” Antoinette whispered, “Mytris stopped a Yurkian lord who attacked Shannon. A Yurkian lord he said he cursed.”

Falien sighed heavily, “Shit. Why are we all so fucking connected? This boy of yours... Mytris... He wasn’t the one who cursed me. It was the girl. I deserved it. I deserved worse. I... I don’t know how to regret what I’ve done. But I do. Ever since I met Gwen. She hates me... And that somehow makes me wish I was better. I don’t know how to explain it. I don’t want to ask forgiveness. I am an asshole.”

Antoinette shook her head, “Shannon. She was our High Priestess.”

“Astrian mentioned it.”

Antoinette clenched a fist, and Falien winced, closing his eyes. “Oh. It was her.”

“Yes.” The princess whispered, letting him know just how much she cared.

Falien shrugged, “If it’s worth anything, then my death might actually stop the hellflame. Apparently a part of her is in me. So long as I live my cursed life, her life continues.”

Antoinette stepped forward, “The skill to resurrect. It’s rare. Does any of the Yurkian mages have it? Could they use it to bring Shannon back to us?”

“No.” Falien smiled, “That ability is beyond any human mage I know of. It requires divinity to pull it off. Maybe the Fae?”

Antoinette shook her head, “Sorry. It was just an idea. It’s rare even amongst the Fae.”

Verity

She looked sideways at the new sister as she explained the rooms and what they were being used for. “How did you meet the prince?”

“He got inside my head and made me fuck him.” Guinevere growled angrily.

Verity swallowed nervously, “Tyrsan. Yikes.”

The sister smiled weakly, “Yeah. He’s a jerk. What makes it worse is I know he actually gives a damn about me. Not anyone else. He kills without even noticing it. He manipulates everyone around him. Always has. Doesn’t know another life. He’s... He’s a walking curse. But he wants to be a part of my life. I don’t know if I can actually stop him.”

Verity frowned, “He’s a strange one. His future is blind.”

Guinevere paused, turning towards her, “How do you know?”

“I’m a prophet.” Verity shrugged, “That’s why I’m here. Because I have to be. Just like Falien has to be here. And you.”

Guinevere grinned at her, “A prophet. Wow. I never thought I’d have the chance.”

Verity blushed nervously, “I’m not that special. I get to bleed out my eyes every now and then to see the future. It isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

The sister shrugged, “Does it have to be? It’s an honour all the same.”

Verity nodded slowly, and sighed. “I was a soldier. That was all that mattered to me. Serving Yurk. Staying alive. Fighting when I was ordered to. It was a simple life. I find it... Confusing. All you sisters seem to see the world differently than I. Less... Narrow. You try and see the reason behind things. Try to understand your own place within the world. I never wanted that. It seems to be all you think about.”

“It is, in a way.” Guinevere sighed, “We’ve devoted our lives to the gods. To higher concerns than the mortal world. It seems though, like the mortal world might be ending. At least changing in a fundamental way. Maybe we cared too much about our place and didn’t look around us enough. People were starving before the hellflame wiped out our crops. Even if the orks don’t get us... I don’t know if we can survive.”

Verity shrugged, “The future is always changing. Always. People like your Sister Antoinette shine like a star, twisting the world around them without even realising it. She’s Tyrsan, too. So are you.”

Guinevere blinked in astonishment, “What? How am I a Tyrsan?”

Verity shrugged. “I don’t know. I just know the timelines converge around you. Like they do Antoinette, and Falien. You aren’t the only ones. Sisters Rin and Eri are the same. Yio is, but that shouldn’t be a surprise. Same story with the wyrm. I’ve never imagined this many influential players in one place before. The timelines are... Chaotic. Anything is possible right now.”

Guinevere shook her head, “You must be wrong. I’m a nobody. Certainly not equal to a bloody wyrm or a Fate. I just got dragged into this by the prince.”

“No.” Verity shook her head, smiling, “You drew him to Caledon. He nearly went by it, to go by another route, with another family. He had another toy, but for some reason he gave up quicker than usual. He left his comfort for a new town the moment he crossed near you. You dragged him into this, not the other way. The ’verse made sure Falien was there to protect you.”

Guinevere put a hand on a wall, steadying herself. “How am I important?”

“You play a part in the coming events.” Verity shrugged, “We all do. All we can do is play our part. The gods don’t tend to reveal things clearly. One of them is interested in you, that’s all.”

She wasn’t sure the woman was hearing her. Verity had assumed that the woman would have realised by now what she was. She had to be unreasonably lucky. Had to get away with things that nobody around her did. Yet, it seemed she had never seen passed Falién wanting to control her. Hadn’t realised that it didn’t make sense that he had saved her life. Didn’t make sense that he’d stopped at Caledon when he had.

Guinevere

She was sure that Verity had been trying to reassure her, but all the woman had done was confuse her.

She was somehow important. That was news to her. She wasn't a fighter, she wasn't a mage. She wasn't a healer or politician. There was nothing she particularly skilled at. Her only claim to fame was the obsession of a dangerous and deluded man. Her fame was his infamy. Nothing more than that.

"Oh, shut up."

Guinevere looked up from the floor, looking beside her. A woman was leaning against the wall. She didn't recognise her at first. She'd never seen that face before. Calm and serene. Her voice was almost playful, but had an edge to it that betrayed a more serious spirit.

Her hair though, was pink. Her eyes were black.

"Lady Sarin." She said in awe.

The goddess waved a hand, "Yeah, yeah. I don't care for the formality. Especially now, Guinevere. You're important to me, stupid girl. That's why you're important. I don't care about Falien in the least. He isn't one of my tools. He's one of Wrodin's leftovers. You aren't. You were born because I decided that would be. You became a Sister, because I wanted you to be. You studied history, because I wanted to inspire you. To teach you who you would one day become."

Guinevere swallowed nervously, "And who was I going to become? You're telling me I haven't lived my life. That you lived it for me."

"I'm a god." Sarin yawned, sliding down the wall, and patting her knee, "You have free will. But I also have a responsibility to give you a path. A purpose. Who you are today, probably isn't that important. You're right. But who you will become has no comparison. Humanity calls its greats heroes, after the Warrior-King, Hero. He reshaped humanity's idea of what was possible. What could be. He razed the Faen Realms. He died in the Evening Realms, fighting the source of black magic, Princess Luna, the Shadow Knight herself. That was someone who changed everything. Like you will, one day."

Guinevere felt a chill and turned her head sideways to face her own goddess. The woman she'd sworn to serve all her days. "What do you mean? How... How could I ever compare to that? I can't fight."

"Yet." Sarin smiled, "And fighting isn't what you'll be known for. I've invested in your future. Probably more than I should have. You'll get there one day, Guenivere. It just isn't today. I'm not about to tell you who you will become, because it still is your choice. It will be your choice until that day when destiny finds you. All I can do is give you a path. But I won't have you assuming there isn't one. Not after I put this much effort into it. Making sure you survived the hellflame wasn't exactly the easiest thing in the world. A little easier since Wrodin became mortal and lost his divinity, but Falien is still Wrodin's pawn. He has his own will and effect on the world."

Guenivere smiled slowly, "You didn't want me to be sad."

Sarin giggled, "You saw through me that easily?"

"You're the goddess who established a temple because she heard children crying." Guenivere sighed, "I think... I think I'm proud I was a sister. But the temple is gone. Hell, half the world is gone. We might lose it all before this is over. The High Priestess is dead. The Sisters of Sarin are

over. I am proud of what I was. . . But it is over now.”

“Hardly.” Sarin grinned at her, black eyes flashing, “The temple is rebuilt from the ashes. All the old ways have been destroyed. The corrupt. The weak. It has all been purged. The temple now has only the strong, the just and those willing to do whatever it takes to bring my justice to this world. The temple is stronger than it has been in a thousand years. The Temple of Ozandius will never fall. It has become a thing that even gods fear. Why has Kru hesitated to attack Ozandia? Because of my people. I can’t fight Kru, not directly. She can’t fight me. But three million orks at her disposal and she hesitates. Because of people like you, Guenivere.”

The woman smiled, wiping a frightened tear from her eye, “You make it sound like we can win this.”

“You already have.” Sarin smiled, “The conclusion is already inevitable. All the timelines are converging on it. All that remains is for each one of you to play a part in this final act.”

Guenivere smiled, “So. I guess I survive this, then.”

“I wouldn’t be quite that cocky.” Sarin laughed, “I wouldn’t want my investment wasted because you let an archer get in a lucky shot. But. . . You have a decent chance. Though, I did come to help make it more than just a chance. A taste of your future, you might say.”

Guenivere blinked in surprise, “You’re giving me something?”

“A miracle.” Sarin smiled, “Mind you, it is just the one. The Miracle of Protection.”

Guenivere felt knowledge enter her mind. She looked at her hands in surprise, and then back up, but Sarin was gone. She grinned to herself, and uttered a thankful prayer.

Antoinette

She smiled, despite herself. Despite the stakes that she was playing with.

She could see the hope entering the eyes of the rebels, the sisters. She could hear them whispering. Sarin had been here. Sarin had come and talked with each sister. Granting some miracles, and inspiring others. Letting them know the importance of each and every one of them. This was the power of trust. Of faith.

Red tapped the map, “So, you think we’re ready?”

Antoinette grinned at him, “Ready for the soldiers, or for Iza? The king. Meh. He’s not a concern. Never has been. You’ll get your chance.”

The scarred rebel touched his forehead, “As milady wishes.”

“Shut up, Red.” Eri said to her brother, striding out of the shadows, “We’ve got this, Antoinette. The Sisters of Sarin. Her Inquisitors. We are going to the palace, and we will be just. Just like we promised.”

Antoinette smiled as she saw Rin stepping out from behind Eri, smoothing her dress. Apparently those two had finally made up. They might have been resisting, but when things got this intense, nobody could hold back. Thoughts fly apart. Hearts beat. In the face of death, taboos don’t seem like much.

Rin shrugged, rolling her shoulders, “There’s about two hundred guards, all up. Well a few more, but most of those are wetting themselves.”

Antoinette wondered for a brief moment what sex was like for an empath. Someone who didn’t just feel their own emotions, but the emotions of their partner. Seemed like it would be intense, but also under pressure. You’d know when to adapt to your partner. It might just put you too far inside your own head, like she had been with Shannon.

Rin flashed red, and Antoinette realised she was broadcasting her emotions straight into the girl. She turned her attention back to the maps, “Yio. You there?”

“Of course.” The warrior replied, swinging down from the ceiling. “I was getting bored. So. We’re doing this?”

Antoinette grinned, “Absolutely. You’re taking this tunnel. Take Eri and Rin with you. Red, you go with her. Take no prisoners, but don’t hunt anyone down. We have one goal, and one goal only. Take the throne room, and take Iza alive. Go.”

The four left the room, calling a handful of other sisters to join them. This was the plan. They were ready for this.

“Verity!” Antoinette called, “The rest of you are with me.”

The prophet entered the room, smiling sadly, and Antoinette grinned at her, “You’re with me. We’re taking this tunnel, here. Memorise it.”

The soldier appeared on her face, “We’re ready. Is the prince accompanying us?”

“He’s coming in the third wave.” Antoinette nodded, “Hopefully by then we have Iza in custody.” She spread her hands, “Move out.”

Falien

He wasn't sure about this role that Princess Ariadne had chosen for him.

He was to come to the palace in the last group. If the others had failed, those with him would be slaughtered the moment they emerged into the open. They'd be cut down before they could breathe. All of them, except him. He would get an opportunity to get to Iza, and demand a surrender. It might work. Probably not. If the first waves failed, then he would end up a prisoner in a dungeon of a kingdom that was about to fall.

However, if the others waves were successful, he would come like a king. When all the work was done, he would arrive and it would stamp his authority into place. Ariadne was showing a deference to him. A deference to Yurk. It was political. He could come in and claim the victory for himself.

Usually, that would be exciting. Others would do the work, and he could get the credit. It suited his lifestyle perfectly. Or it used to. Not anymore. Now he wanted an opportunity to prove himself. To show Gwen he wasn't just a useless prince with a heart that deserved to be carved out and eaten. He wanted to prove to her he could change, that he could be better.

He wasn't sure he could prove that to himself, truth be told.

He stood at the entrance to the tunnel that would lead into the palace, and counted slowly, under his breath. He was impatient. Usually he would lie in his hammock, snoring. He wouldn't have a care in the world. Yet this time... Guinevere had gone ahead of him, into the battle. He was worried about her. Not whether or not he'd miss out on his fun with her. He worried if she would live or die.

He'd already come to the understanding he couldn't have her. She wouldn't have him. He would become king of Yurk, with the hand of Ariadne. She would be a wonderful queen. He would be a pointless buffoon. The taste had finally died out. His taste for life. The curse was complete. There was no enjoyment in anything anymore. Not if he couldn't have Gwen.

That was the point. He'd tried to take that away from that street girl, all those years ago. Marking her as his own. Depriving her of anyone who could care for her. So she'd cursed him to actually experience it.

He felt some small happiness in the knowledge that Antoinette had shared something with that girl.

Maybe it would be best if he died in the coming fight.

This... Kru... Should be entirely capable of wiping him from the face of the mortal realm. If he died by her hand, after a public engagement to Ariadne... That outcome would be for the best. Ozandia would join with Yurk, and Yurk would seek the utter destruction of Kru. There would be no compromises. They would fight without ceasing for their idiotic prince's death.

Maybe that could make up for a little of what he had done.

He might only join the ninth circle of hell, rather than the tenth.

Verity

The palace sword swung through the air, and she turned it side with her blade. The hilt of her sword slammed into the face of the guard, knocking him backwards before the blade in her hand swung upwards and sheered through the elbow-joint in the arm. The guard screamed as flesh tore, and metal rent. Blood fell and she turned to block the blow of the next.

She could see them coming. She turned their swords aside, turning every defensive move into a counter-attack. She cut them down. They were soldiers, but they were not prepared for this scale of violence. They could not invent, or create. They were not numerous enough to overwhelm her group. That was the idea behind the two waves attacking. The enemy was divided. The enemy was uncertain of themselves, serving a weak king, hiding in his closet.

In battle, all that matters is survival. Skill doesn't matter. Luck plays as big a role as anything else. But when you can see exactly what the enemy is about to do, you take advantage of it. She decimated them.

She survived.

Guinevere

It had taken a single blow to knock the sword from her hand, and a second blow to pin her to the wall. A sword driven right up to the hilt in it. She'd grabbed the man and headbutted him backwards, allowing the others to do their job.

But she wasn't much more than a liability here.

She didn't accept that.

Guinevere snapped up her hand, a flash of light surrounding the end of the sword. The cuboid barrier cut the end off the sword. She jerked herself upright, screaming as she did. The pain reminded her she was alive. That she had a duty to perform.

A barrier appeared around her, and Guinevere glared down the hallway, "Fallback, now!"

Yio glanced back at her, about to protest, and then leapt out of the way.

Guinevere grinned as her barrier slammed to the sides, knocking ever knight into the brickwork. Crushing them almost instantaneously. She released the barrier, wincing and touching the wound on her shoulder.

Yio peaked out from an alcove, "Nice one. Let's move people. We have more to do. These grunts are just in our way."

Antoinette

She tossed open the doors easily as she walked into the throne room. Two guards went to stop her, and found themselves in the angry hands of Yio and Verity. The skillful hands. They collapsed to the ground.

She glared at the man sitting on the throne. He wasn't running. He wasn't hiding. He sat there, glaring at her as if he still had a right to call himself the king. The world was ending, and he abandoned his people.

"So, the temple betrays me." Iza spat.

Antoinette laughed, "Truly. Have you forgotten that you tried to have us executed? That you placed me in chains in your dungeon? The only betrayal here, worth mentioning, is your own."

"Fair enough." He smiled at her, "It probably is worth mentioning."

Antoinette paused, halfway to the throne. He had something up his sleeve. He had done something. Something to change the stakes of the game.

Iza waved a hand, "Come on Kru, I gave you best entrance I could."

Antoinette's face drained of colour as a woman walked slowly into view. Her eyes glowed a vibrant red. Behind her sparkled two black wings. Her black hair was braided, and hung down her front. It was streaked with white. Black dust hung in the air around her, dancing slowly. There was a pattern to it, an intelligence. This was the Fel. The corrupted magic.

Kru gave a polite bow, and smiled, "I am Lady Kru of the Kruei. Current ruler of the Burning Realms and the Ruins of Eldrasa. I am here at the invention of your king. I always have been. Even when invaded that stupid remote town in the south. Just another trap, for your High Priestess. Ozandius has joined my empire."

Antoinette clenched her fists, "As High Inquisitor, I cannot agree."

The king rolled his eyes, "Inquisitor? I never granted any real power to the inquisitors. You're nothing. This is an illegal rebellion, and will be treated as such."

Antoinette smiled slowly, "Really. I wonder if Lady Kru agrees with you. Can you oppose the temple so openly?"

Kru twitched, the calm facade shattering. "My army will deal with your temple."

Verity stepped forward, "If I might interject, your ladyship. You can see the future as clearly as I, can you not? You know what happens now. Why continue to back a dead horse?"

Kru turned to the prophet, smiling, "Because the one I back changes the future. The future is shaped by my will. I am a goddess, puny creature. You see my will, nothing more or less. You see the will of the others. We decide what happens. Not you. Not these puny humans. All of you are about to be slaughtered. My army marches on Ozandia. Anyone found outside the palace walls is dead. Anyone who tries to touch my new governor is also dead. Is that clear enough for you?"

"Go fuck yourself, Kru."

Antoinette spun, her eyes widening in shock. She heard the whole room move, freezing.

A woman was standing there, who hadn't been before. A woman dressed in simple brown farmer's clothes. She pulled back her hood, shaking off snow, and stepped forward, "I think it's about time we finished what we started, goddess. Isn't it? I am after all, the embodiment of Sarin's will is this damned world."

Kru swallowed nervously, “You were dead. You are dead. How are you here?”

Shannon grinned at her, “Who told you I was dead? These ones? Listening to their thoughts and hearts. The sky should have been a bit of a clue, Kru. I already knew dying wasn’t going to fix jackshit. It wasn’t going to stop you. And that is all I care about. I will stop you.”

“You are human!” Kru shouted, a hand tossing up.

Antoinette blacked out as she was slammed into the far wall by the blast.

Falien

He paused at the doors, thrown to the ground and shattered. His dreams of arriving as the star shattered with them.

The prince peeked inside and stared at what he found.

Flames danced on the other side of the room, a violent and catastrophic amount of force pouring out a woman surrounded by a black haze. An unending force striking into a yellow barrier, holding it on one side of the room. Around them, everyone was on the ground. Wounded, and weak.

He could feel weakness, just coming close to this battle. Like his own life was being pulled away. The amount of magic being channelled here was beyond incredible. It was verging on the insane. If the two of those kept fighting, then the world would end. Right here, and right now. The fabric of reality would split under the force.

What girl was opposing the woman?

He looked at the simply garbed person. They wore the clothes of a commoner. A farmer. They didn't have the look. The way they held themselves, both with confidence and with meekness at the same moment. This was a street kid. How in the blazes was a street kid holding off a literal goddess? How were they opposing Kru?

She flicked her brunette hair out of her eyes, sweat beading on her face, and Falien felt like his heart had stopped.

It was her.

The girl who had cursed her so long ago. A street brat he had treated like she was nothing. Like she was toy to play with, and then discard when he got bored of her. That child was now a woman standing against an angry goddess, drawing power that he could never even imagine. No wonder his curse had lasted this long. It was made by someone who had no limit to their potential. The very best of humanity.

"Falien! I will deal with you later, you shit cake, but right now, get everyone out!" The woman yelled back at him.

He dashed forward without thinking, grabbing and dragging people from the room. He never questioned it. Couldn't question it. He may be a king, but he was so far below her authority it didn't deserve thinking about. She might be the High Priestess in title, but in truth she was an avatar of the gods.

He was a man.

She was something more than human. Something that mattered more than he ever would.

She didn't have to mark him out. Beside her, he was worthless.

Verity

She flinched, touching the back of her head. She was awake now. She'd been knocked aside. . . Her eyes widened as she saw the timelines tumbling around her. Breaking and falling apart. The future was disappearing. There was only now and the past. There was no future. Everything was in flux. She didn't know how she was continuing to exist, or anyone was.

She forced herself upright, and felt a hand on her shoulder. The prince. "Don't go in there. Mortals won't survive."

She shrugged him off, glancing around the corner, and staring in astonishment at the even matching between the two. It wasn't possible. How could an avatar be equal to an actual goddess?

It felt like heresy.

She pulled back. She needed to know what to do. What the future should hold, how to make it happen. She couldn't just sit back whilst gods fought for her own future. For the future of humanity. The High Priestess couldn't succeed against Kru. It didn't make any sense. It shouldn't be possible, but neither should this current battle. Kru wasn't holding back. The goddess that could equal Sarin or Wrodin was somehow only a match for a pathetic mortal human. A creature that couldn't even hope to equal a Fae. How was it possible?

She did have a way. It would cost her, but she could see what could be, and what should be.

She pulled the small dagger from her belt, and looked at the prince, "I'm about to. . . You'll see. Don't let anyone touch me. Please."

The prince didn't get a chance to voice his confusion. Verity sliced open her palm, hissing between her teeth before slamming the palm against the ground.

The world flew up around her, disassembling.

She shook, biting her jaw to keep it closed as she felt blood to begin to emerge from her eyes. The warm liquid trickled down her face, but she could feel the magic resisting her. Fighting her. It was as if the world itself was trying to close off against her. She'd never felt this. Usually she paid a price, and then the doors opened. Not this time. Reality was rebelling against itself.

A hand touched her shoulder, and she groaned, looking up. It wasn't Falien.

The black-haired boy sat down next to her, smiling. "You made it. Congratulations. You're walking the thin line between life and death."

Verity winced, looking around her at the frozen chaos. "Then why am I still here?"

"Because." The boy shrugged, "Because the world is here, right now. Everything exists here, in this moment, and nowhere else. This is the moment where existence is decided."

Verity felt her heart skip, "How. . . How is that possible? She's just a human."

"So?" The boy laughed, "Summer is just a Fae. She can still equal most of the gods. Yio is just a mortal, but everyone is terrified of her. The right person, in the right place and time is all it takes. Shannon is just human. She really is. Not everyone here is. Guinevere definitely is not. It doesn't matter, in the end. Shannon is an anchor. She is what binds the future and the past to the present. That's more power than any god has. Well. . . It might define what a god is. Gods are change. So is Shannon."

Verity nodded slowly, "How do I help her? How do I stop Kru?"

"You don't." He shrugged, leaning against the wall, "This is Shannon's fight, Verity. This is

what Shannon has been moving towards her whole life. There's no one else out there who can do what she does. No one who can even help in this fight. That's not your place. You're here to pick up the pieces afterwards. To help Antoinette, and Falien. To make sure Ozandia and Yurk succeed. There's still an army of orks. This won't all be a battle of gods. The battle of humankind is only beginning."

She sighed heavily, "We have to sit here and wait?"

"Unless you want to die." He smiled, "That's a choice. That's the choice that brings you here, to me. You don't have to go back, back into a world on the verge of collapse."

Verity shrugged, "Yeah... Yeah I do. For Ruth, and everyone else."

"Deep thinking, for you."

She laughed, "I'd ask how you know that, but you're a god."

"Not really." He shrugged, "I'm just someone who can make a move at the right moment. Kru was a Fae, until she controlled her moment. Until she changed all the realms. She became chaos. The embodiment of change, because she was willing to step up. That's all godhood is. Gods aren't above humans. Gods are men and women. Just like the rest of you."

Guenivere

She groaned as the pain shot through her. She couldn't move. It felt like her spine had been completely shattered. It might have been. She'd been knocked aside as if she were just a leaf on the wind. Or a rock tumbling over a waterfall into a pit of razor sharp spikes. Something along those lines.

What she'd seen... It was so much beyond anything she'd expected. The power of a god, even if it was being contained to a tiny puny physical form, was beyond understanding. If there wasn't a barrier erected around the battlefield, they'd all be dead just from the side effects. All the same, she could see the mortar in the stone of the walls curling and giving way. She could see the paintings on the wall being scorched. Even the ground was hot to the touch. Life was being pulled out of everything.

This wasn't just magic. This was ancient magic. The magic of reality itself. The power the gods used to create the realms, to create humanity.

This was the power of creation. An unbridled power that could also be used to destroy. To not just break things in a haphazard way, but to unmake them. To make it so something never existed in the first place. With magic like this... Time and space and matter were revealed as the abstractions that they were. The mind had to rise above it, to view the world as only a god could.

She hoped that the High Priestess was up to the job.

She was handpicked by Sarin herself. This was the woman that the goddess had chosen. A woman willing to get everyone to think she was dead so that she could bring Kru out of hiding, to engage her directly in battle. She had to have a plan, an idea of what to do. A way to beat the Fel.

"Oh, that's an easy one."

She looked up, seeing the blonde-haired Fae standing in front of her. She swallowed nervously, "You're back. Is Calis...?"

"Engaged with the orkish army." Astrian replied, glancing towards the doorway and blasts of light emerging from it. "I'm not quite up to the task of walking in there. But, I brought a friend who is."

Guenivere turned, looking around. She couldn't see anyone.

Astrian rolled her eyes, "She's always late. Always turning up at the wrong moment."

"Hey!" A woman said as she popped out of the air. The white-haired woman patted herself off, "I was busy, Astrian. Seriously. It wasn't my fault this time, and it wasn't my fault I saw him naked either."

Astrian grinned, and smiled, "About time, Luna. So... What do you say? Time to take the Fel back from Kru?"

Guenivere blinked, "The Fel? Wasn't it created by the orks?"

The white haired woman flicked her hair over her shoulder, "Drak'tur wishes. He reinvented the thing I was born to bear. I knew what it was. I had the good sense to forbid the use of the Fel. A corrupted magic that rip the soul out of every living thing. No good could come from that. That human idiot decided to use it try and create a new species."

She turned and walked towards the fallen doors, "Astrian, coordinate between this High Priestess and myself, would you?"

Shannon

It was weird. Having the Fae inside her head. Their personality was absolutely brutal. They were a weapon of war. Yet, it was tempered. Beneath the warrior was another spirit, one that was ridiculously kind. One the Fae didn't particularly like that she knew about.

Shannon winced, pushing the barrier back against Kru, and smiled as her thoughts met the Fae's.

She dropped the barrier, rolling aside.

The white haired Fae snapped a hand upright. Kru screamed angrily as the flow of black dust floating around her shot towards the Fae. It froze, halfway between them. Caught between the will of a goddess, and the will of a warrior. Neither bending, neither yielding.

Shannon slammed the barrier in around Kru. The Fel flowed into the white-haired Fae, who dropped to her knees, vomiting. Shannon flinched as she felt the barrier immediately begin to expand. Kru glared at her from inside, screaming what Shannon could only assume were curses and curse words. She smiled grimly, reaching out for the other miracle.

Flames filled the inside of the cube. The barrier stopped moving. Shannon swallowed weakly, "I can't hold this for long. Get a hold of yourself, Fae."

The white-haired woman made an irritated sound and pulled herself upright, "Whatever. I'm ready."

The barrier dropped. The flames evaporated.

Kru stood there, red eyes blazing.

The world shifted around Shannon as the first attack moved towards her. A simple fireball the size of a small horse. Except Shannon wasn't there anymore. She was re-emerging behind the Fae. She wrapped her arms around the Fae, wincing.

Kru didn't get a chance to shake her off.

The miracle blazed out of Shannon like a bright light. The light snapped into every surface in the room. The white-haired Fae was launched off her feet, the Fel evaporating from around her. Each speck of dust turning into a bright spark of light. The ground creaked as branches and leaves began to grow. The rocks of the walls shook as moss sprang out of every crack.

Kru screamed.

Her wings threatened to snap Shannon's arms, but she wouldn't let go. Kru shook, the dust falling from her. Each speck flaring for a moment before vanishing. Shannon spun her around, gripping the woman's face. She growled, feeling the spell flowing out of her. Feeling the curse on the woman in front of her. Shadows began to appear. Rising like smoke from Kru's mouth and eyes.

"Who are you?" Shannon snapped.

Kru spoke, but it wasn't her. The Fae was catatonic. This was something else. Something inside her. Inside the Fel. "Well done. Now release my servant, human. I may yet allow you to live."

Shannon laughed through gritted teeth, upping the ante. "She's not yours anymore. No one will ever be yours."

"I have the Fel. The corruption is everywhere. This world is already destroyed." Kru laughed with fluttering eyes, "What is it that you can do to me, pathetic human?"

Shannon growled, glaring, "Survive. I'm human, after all. I will survive."

The creature inhabiting the Fae screamed angrily, and Shannon felt it begin to lose its grip on the woman. "You can't keep this up. So, again, lets have that name."

"I am the light at the edge of the world. I am the rising darkness. I am that which lies between the night and the day!" The creature screamed, "I am your end, and the end of every stinking human! I am Ausosa!"

Kru collapsed in her arms, and the shadows were gone.

Shannon breathed a sigh of relief, falling to her knees. She looked up at the white-haired Fae, but she was gone.

Well, this part was over. The hard part was still coming.

Like explaining to Antoinette why she'd mislead her into thinking she was dead. Yio would understand. Antoinette... Would be upset.

Antoinette

She walked into the room cautiously. It was... Alive. The ground and walls were covered in tree branches and moss. In the centre of the new life, a Fae was lying unconscious on the ground. Curled into a ball, shivering. Crying.

Antoinette looked around slowly, and sighed heavily.

She couldn't see Shannon. She was gone. Moved on to do whatever the goddess needed her to do next. It hurt. It shouldn't. She should be proud of Shannon. That she was a force to be reckoned with. That she had actually managed to cure a goddess. Or at least, that was what Antoinette assumed she'd done.

Something hissed in her ear.

Antoinette spun around, grabbing at her shoulder in a panic.

The woman standing in front of her burst out laughing, "Got you."

Antoinette punched her in the face angrily. "Seriously!? What in the fuck made you think now was the time to pull a goddamned motherfucking prank!?"

Shannon rubbed her cheek, still smiling, "I guess I deserved that one. Hey, Antoinette."

She glared at her.

Shannon looked at her feet, "I'm sorry. I did what I had to."

"You died." Antoinette said, crossing her arms, "So now, I have to marry a stuck up asshole of a prince. Who I think you actually know."

Shannon glared at the doorway, "Oh yes. I know that bastard. He scarred me, Antoinette. He's the one who did that to me. Well... Mostly. I made it worse trying to get his fucking mark off me."

Antoinette clenched her fists, "He's the crown prince of Yurk. Unfortunately, right now, we need him."

"Fuck that." Shannon said, blowing her hair, "I won't let you."

Antoinette spread her hands in exasperation, "The sky is falling. The orks are still here. How exactly are you expecting Ozandia to survive this?"

"Under it's queen." Shannon smiled at her, "Queen Antoinette. Not Ariadne. You. You will lead Ozandia."

She rolled her eyes, "Yeah. I don't think that really satisfies either of the armies camped on our doorsteps."

Shannon laughed, "Kru's not dead, Antoinette. She's just upset. She'll rein in her boys. Well, partly."

The Fae waved a hand, "I'm not giving it all up. Our worlds are dead. Deal with it."

Antoinette sighed heavily, "And Yurk?"

Shannon took her hand gently, "You and I, and Prince Asshole, are going to go talk to them. Now."

Antoinette smiled sadly at her, "Prince Asshole and I already discussed this. It is the best answer. The only answer the king will accept."

“Which is why we’ll be talking to the king.” Shannon smiled tightly, “Antoinette, I’m still your High Priestess. I’m ordering you not to go through with it. Or embarrass me in front of the bloody Yurkian king.”

“My father?”

Antoinette flinched as Shannon slammed a small barrier cube into the man’s nutsack. The priestess turned, smiling tightly, “Gods you’re lucky I’m in a good mood. I hope you know that.”

Falien groaned from where he was on the ground. She wasn’t sure if that was agreement or just pain.

Shannon rolled her shoulders, “Now then. Guinevere, I need you.”

A sister stumbled into the room, stepping over where Falien was still moaning, “Me? High Priestess?”

“You’ve studied maps.” Shannon shrugged, “How far from here is the Yurkian capital? The palace, to be exact. And the angle.”

Guinevere sat down slowly, running her hands over a tree branch, “Seriously? Eh... Priestess. Umm... I can make a best guess.”

“It’ll do.”

Antoinette raised an eyebrow, “Don’t tell me you can transport now.”

“No...” Shannon shrugged slowly, “Umm... Kru is going to send us on our way.”

Antoinette glared at her, “I am not stepping into a portal made by someone who just nearly killed you. Are you insane?”

Shannon rolled her eyes, “Kru is fine. She isn’t particularly nice, but she’ll help us. Because it’ll mean we won’t annoy her, and let her go her own way. Plus, if she doesn’t help us I have a feeling that Yio will spend the next three decades lecturing her.”

Antoinette blinked. She hadn’t noticed the Fate sitting beside Kru. When had she come into the room?

Yio looked up, tears running down her cheeks. “Thank you, Shannon. For bringing her back.”

“Fuck you all.” Kru muttered, obviously half asleep.

Antoinette sighed heavily, “Fine. Falien, drag your ass over here. We’re going to talk to your dad.”

He stumbled upright, “Dad won’t be happy to see you.”

Shannon laughed, “Is anyone ever happy to see the avatar of a goddess they’ve pissed off?”

Falien

He vomited as the world stopped moving around him. He groaned, shaking his head, “That is the worst possible way to travel that is conceivable.”

Shannon laughed, “That’s the nicest. That was just a Channel and Shift. Try a Splitting.”

“What is this!?”

Falien looked over at his father and bowed low. He also noted that the two people with him did not. Which was certain to aggravate the man. “Father. Must we always meet like this?”

“Must you always be useless?” His father replied, “I sent you with the warband, to Ozandia.”

“I am Shannon, High Priestess of Ozandius.”

His father paused, “And this... Other thing?”

Falien swallowed nervously, “This is Princess Ariadne, father.”

The king growled angrily, “So, at the eve of your own destruction, you come with politics. I don’t care. Ozandius will fall.”

“As will Yurk.” Shannon shrugged, stepping forward. She turned, looking out a window, “It is good to see clear skies again, isn’t it? King of Yurk?”

“I am the High King Tyran.” His father sighed, “The hellflame has faded, but your destruction will still come about.”

“The hellflame falls when I command it.” Shannon stated simply.

Falien flinched and took a step backwards quickly. The High Priestess had just admitted to killing most of the world. Of wiping out crops. Of very nearly ending the whole of the world. Why would she do that?

Antoinette sighed, “That one’s true, your majesties. She called it to prevent the conquering of Ozandius by Kru. She is beyond Yurk. She was a goddess. She rules Eldrasa, and has conquered the orks. You, my king, I’m afraid are not quite in the same league as Shannon’s enemies. Don’t try and add yourself to that number.”

The man glared at her, “Have you not come to marry Prince Falien? To add Ozandius to the empire?”

“Fuck, no.” Shannon laughed, turning around, “That’d be your answer. Not mine. See, King Iza sorta died when Kru and I started fighting. A king, even of a nation as small as Ozandius, was just a bystander. Flattened the moment he tried to make himself important. I don’t much care about nations and politics. I do care about the people who look to me to protect them. If you threaten them... I’ll simply wipe Yurk off the face of the continent.”

Tyran sneered, “I am a soldier, High Priestess. I don’t take threats lightly.”

“Of course not. Also, you should look out the window.” Shannon smiled, walking back towards Antoinette.

Falien looked out the window, and felt a chill run down his spine as he saw it.

Shannon grinned, and then snapped her fingers.

The flames in the clouds vanished.

She snapped them again, and Falien flinched.

Shannon rolled her eyes, “So squeamish, Falien. Not like the bastard who tried to make me his little lamb.”

She snapped her fingers, and took Antoinette’s hand, interlacing her fingers, “So... King Tyran. Tell me. Is Ozandius going to have a problem with Yurk? Or are you going to realise that you aren’t my equal? That being treated with respect is a kindness I’m offering, not something you owed by any birthright or slaughter you committed.”

Tyran looked to the room. It was the first time Falien had ever seen his father frightened. The man’s face was ashen.

The king nodded slowly, “Yurk will surrender.”

“No.” Shannon laughed, “Fuck that, too. Ozandius just wants to be left alone, for a while. I really have a lot of shit to do to make up for summoning the hellflame in the first place. The first part of that, will be rebuilding my nation. Yurk can expect their neighbours to make no moves against them. You have your own rebuilding. I have caused a lot of problems. Less than the Fel would have if it had infected the whole of Ozandius, but more than I should have.”

Tyran smiled slowly and bowed, “I see you are a woman of your own words. A rarity amongst the ruling class.”

“I’m not Ozandius’ ruler.” Shannon laughed, “I’m her spiritual leader. Antoinette will be our queen.”

Tyran frowned, “Antoinette?”

She curtsied, “The name I now go by. Ariadne is just my past, King Tyran. It belongs to the past.”

He smiled at them, and then blinked slowly, “I see. Shall Ozandius have two queens?”

Shannon blushed, and Antoinette shifted nervously.

Falien laughed, “Oh wow. Um, father. You might not want to mention that in diplomatic cables. The Ozandians... Don’t appreciate relationships like that.”

Tyran shrugged, “I cannot say I am completely comfortable with it, either.”

Shannon glared at him.

He held up his hands, “I’m not about to endanger my nation, High Priestess. Please.”

Antoinette sighed, “It is going to be a long and complicated road. For now, send a hawk to Ozandia. Recall your troops. Let us get on the road to peace... Then I guess we need to sign some bloody paperwork or something.”

Verity

She sighed as she trudged through the mud that had replaced the snow. It felt strange to be going home. Back to Yurk. As if she hadn't abandoned the army to go chasing after myths and legends. It didn't seem to matter to herself if she actually found them. It still felt like a betrayal.

"You'll forgive yourself, eventually."

She looked sideways at a soldier in perfectly clean armour, with pink hair peeking out of the gap between helmet and cuirass. Verity smiled softly, "I'm honoured, my lady."

The soldier shrugged, "I thought I owed you. I did drag you into all of this. I did need you, though. Without you, Antoinette wouldn't have reached the throne room."

Verity smiled softly, "Peace is coming. I should thank you."

"Peace isn't coming." The soldier shook their head, "Peace is about the furthest thing from what is coming. At least we do know who is coming, finally. Ausosa. I'd hoped she was dead. It would have been better than any of this. You will see things soon, prophet. I need you to promise me you won't kill yourself to escape the visions. You'll be needed again, before this is over."

Verity swallowed nervously, "Who is Ausosa?"

"A Fae." The goddess sighed heavily, "Her kind know her well. They will not be taking the news that she is alive, well. Their queen, least of all."

Verity sighed heavily, "That's the only hint I'll get, isn't it?"

"For now." The goddess laughed, "You'll be getting visions of her soon enough. And you'll be tempted to carve them out of your skull with a dagger. So. The promise?"

Verity winced. "If things are really that bad... I saw the end of the world and wasn't tempted to kill myself. I had my friend dismembered in front of me, and wasn't tempted. If things are as bad as you suggest, then I can't give that promise. Because I doubt I will be in control of my actions."

"Fair enough." The goddess replied, "Try and take care of Yurk, Verity. King Tyran will need your guidance. And if you're tempted, Falien has no need of his balls. Feel free to neuter him."

Guinevere

“Packing?”

Guinevere turned, seeing another of the sisters. Eri. She had been kind, since the end of the calamity. Looking after her, guiding her. But she didn’t want to settle into the new temple at Ozandia. She had something else she wanted to do. Had to do.

“Yeah.” She shrugged, “It’s time I left, Sister Eri. Time I went home.”

Eri frowned, “Caledon was lost. There are no survivors. Just a burned out husk of a town.”

Guinevere smiled, “Maybe. I’m hoping there’s something more there. Hope.”

Eri grinned slowly, “Do you really think that he’ll go back there? Did you even give him a hint?”

Guinevere shrugged, “I didn’t. If I had, it wouldn’t mean anything if he did show up. If he shows up, it’ll be to try and correct something he did. To prove to himself that he has a hope of changing.”

Eri rolled her eyes, “That’s... We are talking about Falien aren’t we? The dude is completely freaking evil. Down to the core.”

“I don’t think so.” Guinevere replied, “I think... I think he has a lot to make up for. Don’t worry. I won’t be throwing myself at him even if he does rock up. I’m not going to be his girlfriend. I’m going to be his... Priestess. To teach him how.”

Eri nodded slowly, “And if he doesn’t?”

“I’ll rebuild Caledon. The mines will have to reopen eventually.” She shrugged, “I’ll find my way. I’m not sure what my path is yet... But I know I have one.”

Shannon

She grinned as she watched Antoinette muttering to herself as she filled out yet another series of documents. Another set of orders to deploy and redeploy sisters throughout Ozandius. Distributing resources, trying to teach the survivors. Moving towns closer to the capital city.

She let her arms snake around the woman, “Wow. Working hard.”

“Yes.” Antoinette sighed heavily, sitting back in the chair, “I am. I hate being queen. Why do you always do this to me? Make me take the job where everyone hates you and has an opinion about how terrible you are?”

Shannon shrugged, “I don’t know. Maybe I think you look cute when you’re frustrated.”

Antoinette glared sideways at her, “What new hell are you bringing on me, Shannon?”

She kissed her nose, “None. Hopefully. This time.”

Antoinette stared at her without any comprehension whatsoever. Shannon smiled sheepishly, “We... Left things kinda bad last time. And since the calamity, I haven’t exactly had an free time.”

Antoinette waved a hand at the desk, “Does this look like free time?”

“No...” Shannon said slowly, “But... I’m impatient. I think... I think I was too eager last time. So... I’ve put a barrier around the room. We can be as slow as we like. No one will be interfering.”

Antoinette smiled slowly, “Oh. So that’s what this is.”

“Shut up and kiss me.” Shannon glared.

So she did.

Sequel

Fury of Balavid

James Milne



Figure 1: Fury of Balavid